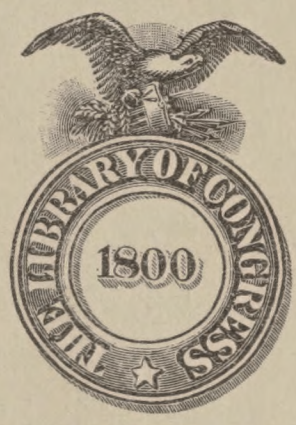

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MONSIEUR LECOQ.

CHAPTER I.

THE SEARCH.

On the 20th of February, 18—, a Sunday that chanced to be Shrove Sunday, about eleven o'clock in the evening, a party of agents of the safety-service left the police-station at the old Barriere d'Italie.

The mission of this party was to explore that vast precinct which extends from the road to Fontainebleau to the Seine, and from the outer boulevards to the fortifications.

This quarter of the city had at that time anything but an enviable reputation. To venture there at night was considered so dangerous that soldiers from the forts, who came to Paris with permission to attend the theatre, were ordered to wait at the *barriere*, and not to pass through the perilous locality except in parties of three or four.

After midnight, these gloomy and narrow streets became the haunt of flocks of homeless vagabonds. Escaped criminals and malefactors made this quarter their rendezvous. If the day had been a lucky one, they made merry over their spoils. When sleep overtook them, they hid in doorways or among the rubbish in deserted houses.

Every effort had been made to dislodge these dangerous guests, but the most energetic measures had failed of success.

Watched, hunted, and in imminent danger of arrest though they were, they always returned with idiotic obstinacy, obeying, as one might suppose, some mysterious law of attraction.

Hence, the police had there an immense trap, constantly baited, to which their game came of their own accord to be caught.

The result of a tour of inspection was so certain, that it was with an assured tone the officer in charge of the post called to the squad as they departed:

"I will prepare lodgings for our guests. Good luck to you, and much pleasure!"

This last wish was pure irony, for the weather was the most disagreeable that could be imagined.

A very heavy snow-storm had prevailed for several days. It was now beginning to thaw, and on all the frequented thoroughfares the slush was ankle-deep. It was still cold, however; a damp chill filled the air, and penetrated to the very marrow of one's bones. Besides, there was a dense fog, so dense that one could not see one's hands before one's face.

"What a beastly job!" growled one of the agents.

"Yes," replied the inspector who commanded the squad; "I think if you had an income of thirty thousand francs you would not be here."

The laugh that greeted this commonplace joke was not so much flattery as homage to a recognized and established superiority.

The inspector was, in fact, one of the most esteemed members of the force, a man who had proved his worth.

His powers of penetration were not, perhaps, very great; but he thoroughly understood his business, its resources, its labyrinths, and its artifices. Long practice had given him imperturbable coolness, a great confidence in himself, and a sort of coarse diplomacy, that answered in place of shrewdness.

To his failings and to his virtues he added incontestable courage.

He laid his hand upon the collar of

the most dangerous malefactor as tranquilly as a devotee dips his fingers in a basin of holy water.

He was a man about forty-six years of age, strongly built, with rugged features, a heavy moustache, and rather small, gray eyes, hidden by bushy eyebrows.

His name was Gevrol, but he was universally known as "General."

This sobriquet was pleasing to his vanity, which was not slight, as his subordinates well knew; and, doubtless, he felt that he ought to receive from them the consideration due a person of that exalted rank.

"If you begin to complain already," he added, gruffly, "what will you do by and by?"

In fact, it was too soon to complain.

The little party were then passing up the Rue de Choisy. The people upon the sidewalks were orderly; and the lights of the wine-shops illuminated the street.

For all these places were open. There is no fog nor thaw that is potent enough to dismay lovers of pleasure. And a boisterous crowd of maskers filled each saloon and public ball-room.

Through the open windows came, alternately, the sounds of loud voices and bursts of noisy music. Occasionally a drunken man staggered along the pavement, or a masked figure crept along in the shadow of the houses.

Before certain establishments Gevrol commanded a halt. He gave a peculiar whistle and almost immediately a man came out. It was another member of the force. His report was listened to, and then the squad passed on.

"To the left, boys!" ordered Gevrol; "we will take the Rue d'Ivry, and then cut through the shortest way to the Rue de Chevaleret."

From this point the expedition became really disagreeable.

Their way led through an unfinished street that had not even been named, full of mud-puddles and deep-holes, and obstructed with all sorts of rubbish.

There were no longer any lights or drinking saloons; no footsteps, no voices; nothing but solitude, gloom and silence.

One might have supposed one's self a hundred leagues from Paris, had it not been for the deep and continuous murmur that always arises from a large city, like the hollow roaring of a torrent in the depths of a cave.

All the men had turned up their pantaloons, and were advancing slowly, picking their way as carefully as an Indian when he is stealing upon his prey.

They had just passed the Rue de Chateau des-Rentier, when suddenly a wild shriek rent the air.

At this place, and at this hour, this cry was so frightfully significant, that all the men paused as if by common impulse.

"Did you hear that, General?" asked one of the police, in a low voice.

"Yes, there is murder going on not far from here—but where? Silence! let us listen."

They all stood motionless, with anxious ears, holding their breath, and soon a second cry, or rather a wild howl, resounded.

"Ah!" exclaimed the captain of the guard, "it is at the Poivriere."*

This peculiar appellation described exactly the place which it designated, and the guests that were wont to frequent it.

In figurative language that has its source in Mount Parnassus, they say that a man is "peppered" when he leaves his good sense in the bottom of his glass; hence the sobriquet of "stealers of pepper" given to the rascals whose specialty is to plunder inoffensive and helpless drunken men.

"What!" added Gevrol, "you do not know Mother Chupin's drinking saloon there, on the right. Run."

And setting the example, he dashed off in the direction indicated. His men followed, and in less than a minute they reached a hovel, sinister of aspect and standing alone.

It was indeed from this house that the cries had proceeded. They were repeated, and were immediately followed by two pistol shots.

The house was hermetically closed, but through the heart-shaped windows covered with shutters, filtered a reddish light like that of a fire.

One of the policemen darted to one of these windows, and raising himself up by clinging to the shutters with his hands, he endeavored to peer through the cracks, and to see what was passing within.

Gevrol himself ran to the door. "Open!" he commanded, striking it heavily.

No response.

But they could hear plainly the sound of a terrible struggle—of fierce imprecations, hollow groans, and occasionally the sobs of a woman.

"Horrible!" cried the policeman, who was peering through the shutters; "it is horrible!"

This exclamation decided Gevrol.

"Open, in the name of the law!" he cried, a third time.

And no person responding, with a blow of his shoulder that was as violent as a blow from a battering-ram, he dashed open the door.

Then the horror-stricken accent of the man who had been peering through the shutters was explained.

The room presented such a spectacle that all the agents, and even Gevrol him-

*Pepper-box.

self, remained for a moment rooted to their places, cold with unspeakable horror.

Everything about the place denoted that it had been the scene of a terrible struggle, one of those savage conflicts that too often stain the drinking saloons of the *barrieres* with blood.

The lights had been extinguished at the beginning of the strife, but a huge fire of pine logs illuminated the remotest corners of the room.

Tables, glasses, decanters, household utensils, and stools had been overturned, thrown in every direction, trodden upon, and shivered into fragments.

Near the fire-place two men were stretched upon the floor. They were lying motionless upon their backs, their arms crossed. A third was lying in the middle of the room.

A woman crouched upon the lower steps of a staircase leading up to the floor above. She had thrown her apron over her head, and was uttering inarticulate moans.

Opposite them, on the threshold of a wide-open door leading into an adjoining room, stood a young man, a heavy oaken table forming a rampart before him.

He was of medium stature, and wore a full beard.

His clothing, which was like that worn by porters about the wharves and railway stations, was torn to fragments, and soiled with dust and wine and blood.

This certainly was the murderer. The expression of his face was terrible. A mad fury blazed in his eyes, and a convulsive sneer distorted his features. In his neck and on his cheek were two wounds that were bleeding profusely.

In his right hand, covered with a handkerchief, he held a pistol, which he aimed at the intruders.

"Surrender!" cried Gevrol.

The man's lips moved, but in spite of a visible effort he could not articulate a syllable.

"Don't do any mischief," continued the inspector, "we are in force, you cannot escape; so lay down your arms."

"I am innocent," exclaimed the man, in a hoarse, strained voice.

"Naturally, but we do not see it."

"I have been attacked; ask that old woman. I defended myself; I have killed—I had a right to do so; it was in self defense!"

The gesture with which he enforced these words was so menacing that one of the policemen drew Gevrol violently to one side, saying, as he did so:

"Take care, General, take care! The revolver has five barrels, and we have heard but two shots."

But the inspector was inaccessible to fear; he freed himself from the grasp of his subordinate and again stepped forward, speaking in a still calmer tone.

"No foolishness, my boy; if your case is a good one, which is possible after all, do not spoil it."

A frightful indecision betrayed itself on the young man's features. He held Gevrol's life at the end of his finger; was he about to press the trigger?

No, he suddenly threw his weapon to the floor, saying:

"Come and take me!"

And turning, he darted into the adjoining room, hoping doubtless to escape by some place of egress known to himself.

Gevrol had expected this movement. He sprang after him with outstretched arms, but the table retarded him.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "the wretch escapes us!"

But the fate of the fugitive was already decided.

While Gevrol was parleying, one of the policemen—the one who had peered through the window—had made a circuit of the house and had effected an entrance through the back door.

As the murderer was darting out, this man sprang upon him, seized him, and with surprising strength and agility dragged him back.

The murderer tried to resist; in vain. He had lost his strength: he tottered and fell upon the table that had protected him, murmuring loud enough for every one to hear:

"Lost! It is the Prussians who are coming!"

This simple and decisive manœuvre on the part of the subordinate had won the victory, and must have delighted the inspector.

"Good, my boy," said he, "very good! Ah! you have a talent for your business, and you will do well if ever an opportunity——"

He checked himself; all his followers so evidently shared his enthusiasm that a feeling of jealousy overtook him. He felt his prestige diminishing, and hastened to add:

"The idea had occurred to me; but I could not give the order without warning the scoundrel himself."

This remark was superfluous. All the men had gathered around the murderer. They surrounded him, and, after binding his feet and hands, they fastened him securely to a chair.

He offered no resistance. His wild excitement had given place to that gloomy prostration that follows all unnatural efforts, either of mind or of body. Evidently he had abandoned himself to his fate.

When Gevrol saw that the men had finished this task:

"Now," he commanded, "let us attend

to the others; and light the lamps, for the fire is going out."

It was with the two men stretched out before the hearth that the inspector began his examination.

He questioned the beating of their hearts; their hearts no longer beat. He held the crystal of his watch close to their lips; the glass remained shining and clear.

"Useless," he murmered, after several trials, "useless; they are dead! They will never see morning again. Leave them in the same position until the arrival of the coroner, and let us look at the third."

The third man still breathed. He was a young man, wearing the uniform of a common soldier. He was unarmed, and his large gray cloak was partly open, revealing his bare chest.

They lifted him very carefully, for he groaned piteously at the slighest movement, and they placed him in an upright position, with his back supported against the wall.

Soon he opened his eyes, and in a faint voice asked for something to drink.

They brought him a glass of water; he drank it with evident satisfaction; then he drew a long breath, and seemed to be regaining some of his strength.

"Where are you wounded?" demanded Gevrol.

"In the head, there," he responded, trying to raise one of his arms. "Oh! how I suffer."

The police agent, who had cut off the retreat of the murderer, approached, and with a dexterity that an old surgeon might have envied, made an examination of the gaping wound that the young man had received in the back of his neck.

"It is nothing," the policeman declared.

But there was no mistaking the movement of his lower lip. It was evident that he considered the wound very dangerous, probably mortal.

"It will be nothing," affirmed Gevrol; "wounds in the head, when they do not kill at once, are cured in a month."

The wounded man smiled sadly.

"I have received my death-blow," he murmured.

"Nonsense!"

"Oh! it is useless to say anything; I feel it, but I do not complain. I have received only my just deserts."

All the agents of police turned toward the murderer on hearing these words. They supposed that he would take advantage of this opportunity to repeat his protestations of innocence.

Their expectations were disappointed; he did not speak, although he must certainly have heard the words.

"It was the brigand, Lacheneur, who enticed me here," continued the wounded man, in a voice that was growing fainter.

"Lacheneur?"

"Yes, Jean Lacheneur, a former actor, who had known me when I was rich—for I have had a fortune, but I have spent it all; I wished to amuse myself. He, knowing I was without a *sou*, came to me and promised me money enough to begin life over again. And because I believed him I came to die like a dog in this hole! Oh! I will have my revenge on him!"

At the thought he clenched his hands threateningly.

"I will have my revenge," he resumed. "I know much more than he believes. I will tell all."

He had presumed too much upon his strength. Anger had given him a moment's energy, but it was at the cost of the life that was ebbing away.

When he again tried to speak, he could not. Twice he opened his lips, but there issued from them only a choking cry of impotent rage.

It was the last manifestation of intelligence. A bloody foam gathered upon his lips, his eyes rolled back in their sockets, his body stiffened, and he fell face downward in a terrible convulsion.

"It is over," murmured Gevrol.

"Not yet," replied the young policeman, who had shown himself so efficient; "but he cannot live more than two minutes. Poor devil! he will say nothing."

The inspector of police had risen from the floor as if he had just witnessed the commonest incident in the world, and was carefully dusting the knees of his pantaloons.

"Oh, well," he responded, "we shall know all we need to know. This fellow is a soldier, and the number of his regiment will be given on the buttons of his cloak."

A slight smile curved the lips of his subordinate.

"I think you are mistaken, General," said he.

"How——"

"Yes, I understand. Seeing him attired in a military coat, you have supposed—— But no; this poor wretch was no soldier. Do you wish an immediate proof of this? Is his hair the regulation cut? Where have you seen soldiers with their hair falling upon their shoulders?"

This objection silenced the General for a moment; but he replied, brusquely:

"Do you think that I keep my eyes in my pocket? What you have remarked did not escape my notice; only I said to myself, here is a young man who has profited by leave of absence to visit the wig-maker."

"At least——"

But Gevrol would permit no more interruptions.

"Enough talk," he declared. We will

now hear what has passed. Mother Chupin, the old hussy, is not dead!"

As he spoke, he advanced towards the old woman, who was still crouching upon the stairs. She had not spoken, nor moved, nor ventured so much as a look, since the entrance of the police, but her moans had not been discontinued.

With a sudden movement, Gevrol tore off the apron which she had thrown over her head, and there she stood, such as years, vice, poverty, and torrents of brandy and *ratafea* had made her; wrinkled, shriveled, toothless and haggard, her skin, yellow and dry as parchment, drawn tightly over her bones.

"Come, stand up!" ordered the inspector. "Your lamentations do not trouble me much. You ought to be sent to prison for putting such vile drugs into your liquors, to breed madness in the brains of your visitors."

The old woman's little red eyes traveled slowly around the room, and in tearful tones she exclaimed:

"What a misfortune! what will become of me? Everything is broken—I am ruined!"

She seemed to be impressed only by the loss of her table utensils.

"Now tell us how this trouble began," said Gevrol.

"Alas! I know nothing about it. I was up stairs mending my son's clothes, when I heard a dispute."

"And after that?"

"Of course I came down, and I saw those three men that are lying there picking a quarrel with that young man whom you have arrested; the poor innocent! For he is innocent, as truly as I am an honest woman. If my son Polyte had been here he would have parted them; but I, a poor widow, what could I do? I cried 'Police!' with all my might."

After giving this testimony she resumed her seat, thinking she had said enough. But Gevrol rudely ordered her to stand up again.

"Oh! we have not done," said he. "I wish other particulars."

"What particulars, dear Monsieur Gevrol, since I saw nothing?"

Anger crimsoned the large ears of the inspector.

"What would you say, old woman, if I arrested you?"

"It would be a great injustice."

"It is what will happen if you persist in remaining silent. I have an idea that a fortnight in Saint-Lazare would untie your tongue."

This name produced the effect of an electric shock on the Widow Chupin. She suddenly ceased her hypocritical lamentations, rose, placed her hands defiantly upon her hips, and poured forth a torrent of invective upon Gevrol and his agents, accusing them of persecuting her family since they had previously arrested her son, a *mauvais sujee*, and swearing that she was not afrad of prison, and would be only too glad to end her days there beyond the reach of want.

At first the General tried to impose silence upon the terrible termagant; but he soon discovered that he was powerless; besides, all his subordinates were laughing. He turned his back upon her, and advancing towards the murderer, he said:

"You, at least, will not refuse an explanation."

The man hesitated for a moment.

"I have already said all that I have to say," he replied, at last. "I have told you that I am innocent; and a man on the point of death who was struck down by my hand, and this old woman, have both confirmed my declaration. What more do you desire? When the judge questions me, I will, perhaps, reply; until then do not expect another word from me."

It was easy to see that this man's resolution was irrevocable; and that he was not to be daunted by any sergeant of police.

Very often criminals, from the moment of their capture, preserve an absolute silence. These men are experienced and shrewd; these are the men who cause lawyers and judges many sleepless nights.

They have learned that a system of defence cannot be improvised at once; that it is, on the contrary, a work of patience and of meditation; and knowing what a terrible effect an apparently insignificant response drawn from them at the moment of detection may produce on a court of justice, they are silent.

Gevrol was about to insist, when some one announced that the soldier had just breathed his last.

"As that is so, my boys," he remarked, "two of you will remain here, and I will leave with the others. I shall go and arouse the commissioner of police, and inform him of the affair; he will take the matter in hand; and we will do whatever he commands. My responsibility will be over, in any case. So untie the legs of our prisoner, and bind Mother Chupin's hands, and we will drop them both at the station-house as we pass."

The men hastened to obey, with the exception of the youngest among them, the same who had won the eulogiums of the General.

He approached his chief, and motioning that he desired to speak with him, drew him outside the door.

When they were a few steps from the house:

"What do you wish?" inquired Gevrol.

"I want to know, General, what you think of this affair."

"I think, my boy, that four scoundrels

encountered each other in this vile den. They began to quarrel; and from words they came to blows. One of them had a revolver, and he killed the others. It is as clear as daylight. According to his antecedents, and according to the antecedents of the victims, the assassin will be judged. Perhaps society owes him some thanks."

"And you think that any investigation—any further search is unnecessary?"

"Entirely unnecessary."

The younger man appeared to deliberate for a moment.

"It seems to me, General," he replied at length, "that this affair is not perfectly clear. Have you noticed the murderer, remarked his demeanor, and observed his look? Have you been surprised as I have been——"

"By what?"

"Ah, well! it seems to me—I may, of course, be mistaken—but I fancy that appearances are deceitful, and —— Yes, I suspect something."

"Bah!—explain why you should, if you please."

"How can you explain the power of scenting his prey possessed by a hunting dog?"

"Gevrol shrugged his shoulders.

"In short," he replied, "you scent a melodrama here—a rendezvous of great gentlemen in disguise, here at the Poivriere—at the house of Mother Chupin! Well, hunt the mystery, my boy; search all you like, you have my permission."

"What! you will allow me?"

"I not only allow you, I order you to do it. You are going to remain here with such an one of your comrades as you may select. And if you find anything that I have not seen, I will allow you to buy me a pair of spectacles."

CHAPTER II.

THE young man to whom Gevrol abandoned what he thought an unnecessary investigation was a debutant in his profession.

His name was Lecoq.

He was a man of twenty-five or twenty-six years of age, almost beardless, very pale, with red lips, and an abundance of wavy black hair. He was rather small, but well proportioned; and his every movement betrayed unusual energy.

There was nothing remarkable about his appearance, if we except his eyes, which sparkled brilliantly or grew dull, according to his mood; and his nose, whose large and rather full nostrils had a surprising mobility.

The son of a rich and respectable family in Normandy, Lecoq had received a good and solid education.

He had begun his law studies in Paris, when in the same week, blow following blow, he learned that his father had died, financially ruined, and that his mother had survived him only a few hours.

He was now alone in the world, destitute of resources—and he was obliged to live. He had an opportunity of learning his true value; it was nothing.

The university, on bestowing the diploma of bachelor, does not give an annuity with it. And of what use is a college education to a poor orphan boy?

He envied the lot of those who, with a trade at the ends of their fingers, could boldly enter the office of any manufacturer, and say: "I would like work."

Such men were working and eating.

He sought bread by all the methods employed by people who are in reduced circumstances! Fruitless labor! There are one hundred thousand people in Paris who have seen better days.

No matter! He gave proofs of undaunted energy. He gave lessons, and he copied documents for a lawyer. He made his *debut* in a new *role* almost every day, and left no means untried to earn an honest livelihood.

At last he obtained employment from a well-known astronomer, the Baron Moser, and spent his days in solving bewildering and intricate problems at the rate of one hundred francs a month.

But a season of discouragement came. After five years of constant toil, he found himself at the same point from which he had started. He was nearly crazed with rage and disappointment when he recapitulated his blighted hopes, his fruitless efforts, and the insults he had endured.

The past had been sad, the present was intolerable, the future threatened to be terrible.

Condemned to constant privations, he tried to escape from the horrors of his real life by taking refuge in dreams.

Alone in his garret, after a day of unremitting toil, assailed by the thousand longings of youth, he endeavored to devise some means of suddenly making himself rich.

All reasonable methods being beyond his reach, it was not long before he was engaged in devising the worst expedients.

In short, this moral and honest young man spent much of his time in perpetrating—in fancy—the most abominable crimes. Sometimes he himself was frightened by the work of his imagination. An hour of recklessness was all that was necessary to make him pass from the idea to the fact, from theory to practice.

This is the case with all monomaniacs; an hour comes in which the strange conceptions that have filled their brains can be no longer held in check.

One day he could not help exposing to

his patron a little plan which he had conceived, which would enable him to obtain five or six hundred francs from London. Two letters and a telegram were all that was necessary, and the game was won. It was impossible to fail, and there was no danger of arousing suspicion.

The astronomer, amazed at the simplicity of the plan, could but admire it. On reflection, however, he concluded that it would not be prudent for him to retain so ingenious a secretary in his service.

This was why, on the following day, he gave him a month's pay in advance, and dismissed him, saying:

"When one has your disposition, and is poor, one will either become a famous thief or a great detective. Choose."

Lecoq retired in coufusion; but the astronomer's words bore fruit in his mind.

"Why should I not follow good advice?" he asked himself.

Police service did not inspire him with repugnance — far from it. He had often admired that mysterious power whose hand was everywhere, which one could not see nor hear, but which heard and saw everything.

He was delighted with the prospect of being the instrument of this power. He considered such a profession as a useful and honorable employment of the special talent with which he had been endowed, and which promised a life of excitement, of thrilling adventures, and fame at last.

In short, this profession held a wonderful charm for him.

So much so, that on the following week, thanks to a letter from Baron Moser, he was admitted into the service.

A cruel disenchantment awaited him. He had seen the results, but not the means. His surprise was like that of a simple-minded frequenter of the theatre, when he is admitted for the first time behind the scenes, and sees the decorations and tinsel that are so dazzling at a distance.

Ah, well!—the opportunity for which he had so ardently longed, for which he had been waiting for months, had come at last, he thought, on entering the Poivriere.

While he was clinging to the window he saw by the light of his ambition the pathway to success.

It was at first only a presentiment. It soon became a supposition, then a conviction based upon actual facts, which had escaped the notice of his companions, but which he had observed and carefully noted.

Fortune had, at last, turned in his favor; he recognized this fact when he saw Gevrol neglect all but the merest formalities of examination, when he heard him declare peremptorily that this triple murder was merely the result of one of those ferocious quarrels so frequent among vagrants on the outskirts of the city.

"Ah, well!" he thought; "have it your own way—trust in appearances, since you will see nothing beneath them! I will prove to you that my youthful theory is better than all your experience."

The carelessness of the inspector gave Lecoq a right to secretly seek information on his own account; but by warning his superior officer before attempting anything on his own responsibility, he protected himself against any accusation of ambition or of unduly taking advantage of his comrade. These would be grave accusations against him in a profession where competition and rivalry are most potent; and where wounded vanity has so many opportunities to avenge itself by all sorts of petty treason.

He spoke then to his superior officer—said just enough to be able to say, in case of success: "Ah! I warned you!"—just enough *not* to dispel the doubt in Gevrol's mind.

The permission that he obtained was his first triumph, and the best possible augury; but he knew how to dissimulate, and it was in a tone of the utmost indifference that he requested one of his comrades to remain with him.

Then, while the others were making ready to depart, he seated himself upon a corner of the table, apparently oblivious of all that was passing. He did not dare to lift his head, for fear of betraying his joy, so much did he fear that his companions would read his hopes and his plans in his face.

Inwardly he was wild with impatience. Though the murderer submitted with good grace to the precautions that were taken to prevent his escape, it required some time to bind the hands of the Widow Chupin, who fought and howled as if they were burning her alive.

"They will never go!" Lecoq said to himself.

They did so at last, however. Gevrol gave the order to depart, and left the house, after addressing a laughing goodbye to his subordinate.

The latter made no reply. He followed them to the threshold of the door, as if to assure himself that the squad had really gone.

He trembled at the thought that Gevrol might reflect, change his mind, and return to solve the mystery, as was his right.

His anxiety was needless. The forms of the men faded in the distance, the cries of Widow Chupin died away in the stillness of the night. They had all disappeared.

Not until then did Lecoq re-enter the room. He could no longer conceal his delight; his eyes sparkled like a conqueror taking possession of an empire;

he stamped his foot upon the floor and exclaimed:

"Now it belongs to us two!"

CHAPTER III.

AUTHORIZED by Gevrol to choose one of his comrades to remain with him in Poivriere, Lecoq had requested the one who was considered the least intelligent of the party to keep him company.

He was not influenced by a fear of being obliged to share the fruits of success with his companion, but by the necessity of having an assistant of whom he could, in case of need, exact obedience. The comrade Lecoq selected was a man of about fifty, who, after a term in the cavalry service, had entered the *prefecture.*

In the humble office that he occupied he had seen *prefet* succeed *prefet*, and had probably filled a prison with culprits whom he had arrested with his own hands.

He was no more shrewd and no more zealous now than he had always been. When he received an order he executed it with military exactitude, so far as he understood it.

If he had failed to understand it, so much the worse.

He discharged his duties like a blind man, like an old horse trained for a riding-school.

When he had a moment's leisure, and any money, he got drunk.

He spent his life between two fits of intoxication, without ever rising above a condition of demi-lucidity.

His comrades had known, but had forgotten, his name. Every one now called him Father Absinthe.

Naturally he did not observe the enthusiasm nor the tone of triumph in his young companion's voice.

"Upon my word," he remarked, when they were alone, "your idea of keeping me here was a good one, and I thank you for it. While the others will spend the night paddling about in the slush, I shall get a good sleep."

Here he stood, in a room that was splashed with blood, that was shuddering with crime, and face to face with the still warm bodies of the murdered men he could talk of sleep!

But what did all this matter to him? He had seen so many similar scenes in his life. And does not habit infallibly lead to professional indifference—that strange phenomenon that makes the soldier cool and composed in the midst of conflict, that gives the surgeon impassibility when the patient shrieks and writhes beneath his operating knife.

"I have been up stairs, looking about," pursued Father Absinthe; "I saw a bed up there, and we can mount guard here, by turns.

With an imperious gesture, Lecoq interrupted him.

"You must give up that idea Father Absinthe; we are not here to sleep, but to collect information—to make the most careful researches, to note all the probabilities. In a few hours the commissioner of police, the physician and the coroner will be here. I wish to have a report ready for them."

This proposition seemed anything but pleasing to the old policeman.

"Eh! what is the use of that?" he exclaimed. "I know the General. When he goes in search of the commissioner, as he has this evening, there is nothing more to be done. Do you think that you see anything that he did not see?"

"I think that Gevrol, like every one else, is liable to be mistaken. I think that he believes too implicitly in what seems to him evidence. I could swear that this affair is not what it seems to be; and I am sure that we can, if we will, discover the mystery which is concealed by appearances."

Though the vehemence of the young officer was intense, he did not succeed in making any impression upon his companion, who, with a yawn that threatened to dislocate his jaws, replied:

"Perhaps you are right; but I am going to bed. This need not prevent you from searching around, however; and if you find anything you can wake me."

Lecoq made no sign of impatience; nor in reality was he impatient. It afforded him the opportunity for which he was longing.

"You will give me a moment first," he remarked. "In five minutes, by your watch, I will promise to let you put your finger on the mystery that I suspect here."

"Well, go on for five minutes."

"After that you shall be free, Father Absinthe. Only it is clear that if I work it out alone, I alone shall pocket the reward that a solution of the mystery will certainly bring."

At the word "reward" the old policeman pricked up his ears. He was dazzled by the vision of an infinite number of bottles of the greenish liquor whose name he bore.

"Convince me, then," said he, taking a seat upon a stool, which he had lifted from the floor.

Lecoq remained standing in front of him.

"To begin with," he remarked; "whom do you suppose the person we have just arrested to be?"

"A porter, probably, or a vagabond."

"That is to say, a man belonging to

the lowest order of society; consequently, a man without education."

"Certainly."

Lecoq spoke with his eyes fixed upon the eyes of his companion. He distrusted his own powers, as is usual with persons of real merit, and he felt that if he could succeed in making his convictions penetrate the obtuse mind of his companion, it would prove the justice of these convictions.

"And now," he continued, "what would you say if I should prove to you that this young man had received an excellent, even refined education."

"I should reply that it was very extraordinary. I should reply that—but what a fool I am! You have not proved it to me yet."

"But I can do so very easily. Do you remember the words that he uttered as he fell?"

"Yes, I remember them perfectly. He said: 'It is the Prussians who are coming.'"

"What do you suppose he meant by that?"

"What a question! I should suppose that he did not like Prussians, and that he supposed he was offering us a terrible insult."

Lecoq was waiting anxiously for this response.

"Ah, well! Father Absinthe," he said, gravely, "you are wrong, quite wrong. And that this man has an education superior to his apparent position is proved by the fact that you did not understand his meaning, nor his intention. It was this single phrase that made the case clear to me."

The physiognomy of Father Absinthe expressed the strange and comical perplexity of a man who is so thoroughly mystified that he knows not whether to laugh or to be angry. After reflecting a little, he decided to be angry.

"You are rather too young to impose upon an old man like me," he remarked. "I do not like boasters——"

"One moment!" interrupted Lecoq; "allow me to explain. You have certainly heard of a terrible battle which resulted in one of the greatest defeats that ever happened to France—the battle of Waterloo?"

"I do not see the connection—"

"Answer, if you please."

"Yes—then!"

"Very well; you must know then, papa, that for some time victory perched upon the banners of France. The English began to fall back, and already the emperor exclaimed: "We have them!" when suddenly on the right a little in the rear, troops were seen advancing. It was the Prussian army. The battle of Waterloo was lost."

In all his life, worthy Father Absinthe had never made such strenuous efforts to understand anything. In this case they were not wholly useless, for he half rose in his chair, and with the tone in which Archimedes cried; "I have found it!" he exclaimed:

"I understand. The man's words were only an allusion."

"It is as you have said," remarked Lecoq, approvingly. "But I had not finished. If the emperor was thrown into consternation by the appearance of the Prussians, it was because he was momentarily expecting the arrival of one of his own generals from the same direction—Grouchy—with thirty-five thousand men. So if this man's allusion was exact and complete, he was not expecting an enemy, but a friend. Now draw your own conclusions."

Amazed, but convinced, his companion opened to their widest extent the eyes that had been heavy with sleep a few moments before.

"*Mon Dieu*!" he murmured, "if you put it in that way! But I forget; you must have seen something, as you were looking through the cracks of the shutter."

The young man shook his head.

"Upon my honor," he declared, "I saw nothing save the struggle between the murderer and the poor devil in the garb of a soldier. It was that sentence alone that aroused my attention."

"Wonderful! prodigious!" exclaimed the astonished old man.

"I will add that reflection has confirmed my suspicions. I asked myself why this man, instead of fleeing, should have waited and remained there, at that door, to parley with us."

With a bound, Father Absinthe was upon his feet.

"Why?" he interrupted; "because he had accomplices, and he wished to give them time to escape. Ah! I understand it all now."

A triumphant smile parted Lecoq's lips.

"That is what I said to myself," he replied, "and now it is easy to verify my suspicions There is snow outside, is there not?"

It was not necessary to say any more. The elder officer seized the light, and followed by his companion, he hastened to the back door of the house, which opened into a small garden.

In this sheltered enclosure the snow had not melted, and upon its white surface numerous foot-prints lay, like dark stains.

Without hesitation, Lecoq threw himself upon his knees in the snow, in order to examine them; he rose again almost immediately.

"These indentations were not made by the feet of men," said he. "There have been women here."

CHAPTER IV.

OBSTINATE men of Father Absinthe's stamp, who are always inclined to differ with the opinions of others, are the very people who end in madly adopting them.

When an idea has at last penetrated their empty brains, they install it there magisterially, and dwell upon it, and develop it until it exceeds the bounds of reason.

Hence the veteran of the service was now much more strongly convinced than his companion, that the usually clever Gevrol was mistaken, and he laughed him to scorn.

On hearing Lecoq affirm that women had taken part in the horrible scene at the Poivriere, his joy was extreme.

"A fine affair!" he exclaimed; "an excellent case!"

And suddenly recollecting a maxim that has been handed down from the time of Cicero, he added, in sententious tones:

"Who holds the woman holds the cause!"

Lecoq did not deign to reply. He was standing upon the threshold, leaning against the casing of the door, his hand pressed to his forehead, as motionless as a statue.

The discovery which he had just made, and which so delighted Father Absinthe, filled him with consternation. It was the death of his hopes, the annihilation of the ingenious structure which his imagination had built upon the foundation of a single sentence. There was no longer any mystery. No celebrity to be gained by a brilliant stroke!

For the presence of two women in this vile den explained everything in the most natural and commonplace fashion.

Their presence explained the quarrel, the testimony of Widow Chupin, the dying declaration of the pretended soldier.

The behavior of the murderer was also explained. He had remained to cover the retreat of the two women; he had sacrificed himself in order to save them, an act of that chivalrous gallantry so common in the French character, that even the scoundrels of the *barrieres* were not entirely destitute of it.

But the strange allusion to the battle of Waterloo remained unexplained. But what did that prove now? Nothing, simply nothing. And who could say how low an unworthy passion might cause a man even of birth and breeding to descend? And the carnival afforded an opportunity for the parties to disguise themselves.

But while Lecoq was turning and twisting all these probabilities in his mind, Father Absinthe became impatient.

"Are we going to remain here until doomsday?" he asked. "Are we to pause just at the moment when our search has been productive of such brilliant results?"

"Brilliant results!" These words stung the young man's soul as deeply as the keenest irony could have done.

"Leave me alone," he replied, gruffly; "and, above all, do not walk about the garden. You will spoil the foot-prints."

His companion swore a little; then he, too, became silent. He submitted to the irresistible ascendancy of a superior will and intelligence.

Lecoq was engaged in following out his course of reasoning.

"These are probably the events as they occurred," he thought.

"The murderer, leaving the ball at the Rainbow, a public house not far from here, near the fortifications, came to this saloon, accompanied by two women. He found three men drinking here, who either began teasing him, or who displayed too much gallantry to his companions. He became angry. The others threatened him; he was one against three; he was armed; he became wild with rage and fired———"

He checked himself, and in an instant after he added, aloud:

"But was it the murderer who brought these women here? If he is tried, this will be the important point. It is necessary to obtain information on the subject."

He immediately went back into the house, closely followed by his colleague, and began an examination of the foot prints about the door that Gevrol had forced open.

Labor lost. There was but little snow on the ground about the entrance of the hovel, and so many persons had passed in and out that Lecoq could discover nothing.

What a disappointment after his patient hopes!

Lecoq could have cried with rage. He saw the opportunity for which he had sighed so long indefinitely postponed. He fancied he could hear Gevrol's coarse sarcasms.

"Enough of this," he murmured, under his breath. "The General was right, and I am a fool!"

He was so positively convinced that one could do no more than discover the circumstances of some commonplace, vulgar broil, that he began to wonder if it would not be wise to renounce his search and take a nap, while awaiting the coming of the commissioner of police.

But Father Absinthe was no longer of this opinion.

This worthy man, who was far from suspecting the reflections in which his

companion was indulging, could not explain his inaction.

"Ah, well! my boy," said he, "have you lost your wits? This is losing time, it seems to me. The justice will arrive in a few hours, and what report shall we present? As for me, if you desire to go to sleep, I shall pursue my investigations alone."

Disappointed as he was, the young police officer could not repress a smile. He recognized his own exhortations of a few moments before. It was the old man who had suddenly become intrepid.

"To work, then!" he sighed, like a man who, while foreseeing defeat, wishes, at least, to have no cause to reproach himself.

He found it, however, extremely difficult to follow the foot-prints in the open air by the uncertain light of a candle, which was extinguished by the least breath of wind.

"It is impossible," said Lecoq; "I wonder if there is not a lantern in the house. If we could only lay our hands upon it!"

They searched everywhere, and, at last, up-stairs in the Widow Chupin's own apartment, they found a well-trimmed lantern, so small and close that it certainly had never been intended for honest purposes.

"A regular burglar's implement," said Father Absinthe, with a coarse laugh.

The implement was useful in any case; the two men were agreed upon that when they returned to the garden and recommenced their investigations systematically.

They advanced very slowly and with extreme caution. The old man carefully held the lantern in the best position, and Lecoq, on his knees, studied each foot-print with the attention of a chiromancer striving to read the future in the hand of a rich client.

A new examination assured Lecoq that he had been correct in his first supposition. It was plain that two women had quitted the Poivriere by this door. They had departed running; this was proved by the length of the steps and also by the shape of the foot-prints.

The difference in the tracks left by the two fugitives was so remarkable, that it did not escape Father Absinthe's eyes.

"*Cristi!*" he muttered; "one of these jades can boast of having a pretty foot at the end of her leg!"

He was right. One of the tracks betrayed a small, coquettish and slender foot, clad in an elegant high-heeled boot with a narrow sole and an arched instep.

The other denoted a broad, short foot, that grew wider towards the end, and which was encased in a strong, low shoe.

This was indeed a clue. Lecoq's hopes revived; so eagerly does a man welcome any supposition that is in accordance with his desires.

Trembling with anxiety, he went to examine other foot-prints a short distance from these; and an excited exclamation broke from his lips.

"What is it?" eagerly inquired the other agent; "what do you see?"

"Come and look for yourself, papa; see there."

The good man bent down, and his surprise was so great that he almost dropped the lantern.

"Oh!" said he, in a stifled voice, "a man's foot-print!"

"Exactly. And this fellow wore the finest of boots. See that imprint, how clear, how neat it is!"

Worthy Father Absinthe was furiously scratching his ear, his usual method of quickening his rather slow wits.

But it seems to me," he ventured at last, "that this individual was not coming *from* this ill-fated hovel.

"Of course not; the direction of the foot tells you that. No, he was not going from here, he was coming here. But he did not pass beyond the spot where we are now standing. He was advancing on tip-toe with outstretched neck and listening ears, when, on reaching this spot, he heard some noise; fear seized him, and he fled."

"Or rather, the women were going out as he was coming, and—"

"No, the women were outside the garden when he entered it."

This assertion seemed far too audacious to suit Lecoq's companion, who remarked: "One cannot be sure of that."

"I am sure of it, however; and can prove it conclusively. You doubt it, papa? It is because your eyes are growing old. Bring your lantern a little nearer—yes, here it is—our man placed his large foot upon one of the marks made by the woman with the small foot and has almost effaced it."

This unexceptionable bit of circumstantial evidence stupefied the old policeman.

"Now, continued Lecoq, "could this man have been the accomplice whom the murderer was expecting? Might it not have been some strolling vagrant whose attention was attracted by the two pistol shots? This is what we must ascertain. And we will ascertain it. Come!"

A wooden fence of lattice-work, a trifle more than three feet high, similar to that which prevents access to the railway trains, was all that separated the Widow Chupin's garden from the waste land that surrounded it.

When Lecoq made the circuit of the house to cut off the escape of the murderer, he had encountered this obstacle, and, fearing lest he should arrive too

late, he had leaped the barrier, to the great detriment of his pantaloons, without even asking if there were not a gateway.

One did exist, however. A light gate of lattice-work similar to the fence, turning upon iron hinges and kept closed by a wooden button, allowed one to enter or depart from this side of the garden.

It was straight to this gate that these footprints in the snow led the two policemen.

Some new thought must have struck the younger man, for he paused suddenly.

"Ah!" he murmured, "these two women did not come to Poivriere this evening for the first time."

"Why do you think that, my boy?" inquired Father Absinthe.

"I could almost swear it. How, unless they were in the habit of coming to this den, could they have been aware of the existence of this gate? Could they have discovered it this dark and foggy night? No; for I, who can, without boasting, say that I have good eyes—I did not see it."

"Ah! yes, that is true!"

"These two women, however, came here without hesitating, without diverging from a straight line; and note that to do this, it was necessary for them to cross the garden diagonally."

The veteran would have given something if he could have found some objection to offer; but unfortunately he could find none.

"Upon my word!" he exclaimed, "yours is a droll way of proceeding. You are only a conscript; I am a veteran in the service, and have assisted in more affairs of this sort than you are years old, but never have I seen—

"Nonsense!" interrupted Lecoq, "you will see much more. For example, I can prove to you that, although the women knew the exact position of the gate, the man knew it only by hearsay."

"The proof!"

"The fact is easily demonstrated, papa. Study the man's footprints, and you, who are very sharp, will see at once that he deviated greatly from the straight course. He was in such doubt, that he was obliged to search for the gate with his hand stretched out before him—and his fingers have left their imprint on the thin covering of snow that lies upon the upper railing of the fence."

The old man would have been glad to verify this statement for himself, as he said; but Lecoq was in a hurry.

"Let us go on, let us go on!" said he. "You can verify my assertions some other time."

They left the garden and followed the footprints that led them toward the outer boulevards, inclinding a little to the right in the direction of the Rue de Patay.

Now there was no longer any need of close attention. No one, save the fugitive, had crossed this lonely waste since the last fall of snow. A child could have followed the track, so clear and distinct was it.

Four impressions, very unlike in character, formed the track; two were those left by the women; the other two, one going and one returning, had been made by the man.

On several occasions the latter had placed his foot exactly on the foot-prints left by the two women, half effacing them, thus doing away with all doubts as to the precise moment in which he had come.

About a hundred yards from the Poivriere, Lecoq suddenly seized his colleague's arm.

"Halt!" he commanded, "we have reached a good place; I can see unmistakable proofs."

The spot was an abandoned lumber-yard, or rather a reservation belonging to a boat-builder. The ground was strewn with large blocks of granite, some chiseled, some in the rough, and with many long planks and logs of wood.

Before one of these planks, whose surface had evidently been wiped off, all these footprints came together, mingling confusedly.

"Here," declared the young detective, "our fugitives met this man and took counsel with him. One of the women, the one with the little feet, sat down upon this log."

"We should assure ourselves of this more fully," said Father Absinthe, in an oracular tone.

But his companion cut short these desires for verification.

"You—my old friend," said he, "are going to do me the kindness to keep perfectly still; pass me the lantern and do not move."

Lecoq's modest tone had suddenly become so imperious that his colleague dared offer no resistance.

Like a soldier at the command to halt, he remained erect, motionless and mute, following the movements of his friend with a curious and wondering eye.

Quick in his motions, and understanding how to manœuvre the lantern in accordance with his wishes, the young policeman explored the surroundings in a very short space of time.

A bloodhound in pursuit of his prey would have been less alert, less discerning, less agile than he.

He came and went, turned, came back again, hurried on, or paused without any apparent reason; he scrutinized, he questioned everything; the earth, the logs of wood, the blocks of stone, and even the

most insignificant objects; sometimes standing, but oftener on his knees, sometimes flat upon his belly, his face so near the ground that his breath must have melted the snow.

He had drawn a tape-line from his pocket: he used it with a carpenter's dexterity, and measured, measured, measured.

And all these movements were accompanied with the wild gestures of a madman, interspersed with oaths or short laughs, with exclamations of disappointment or of delight.

After a quarter of an hour of this strange exercise, he returned to Father Absinthe, placed the lantern on a stone, wiped his hands on his pocket-handkerchief, and said:

"Now I know all."

"Well, that is saying a great deal!"

"When I say all, I mean all that is connected with this episode of the drama which ended in blood in that hovel there. This expanse of earth, covered with snow, is an immense white page upon which the people we are in search of have written, not only their movements and their goings and comings, but their secret thoughts, the hopes and anxieties that agitated them. What do these footprints say to you, papa? To me they are as much alive as the persons who made them; they breathe, they speak, they accuse!"

The old officer was saying to himself:

"Certainly, this fellow is intelligent; undeniably, he is shrewd; but he is very disagreeable."

"These," pursued Lecoq, "are the facts as I have read them. When the murderer repaired to the Poivriere with the two women, his companion—I should call him his accomplice—came here to wait. He was a man of middle age and tall, wore a soft hat and a shaggy brown overcoat, was probably married, as he had a wedding-ring on the little finger of his right hand——"

The despairing gestures of his companion obliged the speaker to pause.

This description of a person whose existence had but just now been demonstrated, these precise details given in a tone of absolute certainty, overturned all of Father Absinthe's ideas completely, and increased his perplexity.

"This is not well," he growled, "this is not kind. You are poking fun at me. I take the thing seriously; I listen to you, I obey you in everything, and this is the way you mock me. We find a clue, and instead of following it up, you stop to relate all these absurd stories."

"No," replied his companion, "I am not jesting, and I have told you nothing of which I am not absolutely sure nothing that is not strictly and indisputably true."

"And you would have me believe——"

"Fear nothing, papa; I would not have you do violence to your convictions. When I have told you my reasons, and my means of information, you will laugh at the simplicity of the theory that seems so incomprehensible to you now."

"Go on, then," said the good man, in a tone of resignation.

"We had decided, my friend, that the accomplice mounted guard here. The time seemed long, and in order to relieve his impatience, he paced to and fro the length of this log of wood, and occasionally paused in his monotonous promenade to listen. Hearing nothing, he stamped his foot, doubtless exclaiming: 'What the devil has happened to him down there!' He had made about thirty turns (I have counted them), when a sound broke the stillness—the two women were coming."

On hearing Lecoq's recital, all the conflicting sentiments that are awakened in a child's mind by a fairy tale—doubt, faith, anxiety, and hope—filled Father Absinthe's heart.

What should he believe? what should he refuse to believe? He did not know. How was he to tell the true from the false among all these equally surprising assertions?

On the other hand the gravity of his companion, which certainly was not feigned, dismissed all idea of pleasantry. Then curiosity began to torture him.

"We had reached the point where the women made their appearance," said he.

"*Mon Dieu!* yes," responded Lecoq; "but here all certainty ceases; no more proofs, only suppositions. Still, I have every reason to believe that our fugitives left the drinking saloon before the beginning of the fight, before the cries that attracted our attention. Who were they? I can only conjecture. I suspect, however, that they were not equals in rank. I am inclined to think that one was the mistress, the other her servant."

"That is proved," ventured the older man, "by the great difference in their feet and in their shoes."

This shrewd observation elicited a smile from the young man in spite of his abstraction.

"This difference," he replied, seriously, "is something; but it was not that which decided me in my opinion. If greater or less perfection of the extremities regulated social distinctions, many mistresses would be servants. What struck me was this:

"When the two women rushed wildly from Mother Chupin's house, the woman with the small feet sprang across the garden with one bound, she darted on some distance in advance of the other. The horror of the situation, the vileness of the den, the horror of the scandal, the

thought of a place of safety, inspired her with marvelous energy.

"But her strength, as often happens with delicate and nervous women, lasted only a few seconds. She was not half way from here to the Poivriere when her speed relaxed, her limbs trembled. Ten steps farther on she tottered and almost fell. Some steps further, and she became so exhausted that she let go her hold upon her skirts; they trailed upon the snow, tracing a faint circle there.

"Then the woman with the broad foot came to her aid. She seized her companion around the waist; she dragged her along; their footprints here are mingled confusedly; then seeing that her friend was about to fall, she caught her up in her strong arms and carried her—and the foot-prints made by the woman with the small feet cease."

Was Lecoq merely amusing himself by inventing this story? Was this scene anything but a work of the imagination? Was this accent of deep and sincere conviction which he imparted to his words only feigned?

Father Absinthe was still in doubt, but he thought of a way in which he might satisfy his uncertainty.

He caught up the lantern and hurried off to examine these foot-prints which he had not known how to read, which had been speechless to him, but which had yielded their secret to another.

He was obliged to agree with his companion. All that Lecoq had described was written there; he saw the confused foot-prints, the circle made by the sweeping skirts, the cessation of the tiny imprints.

On his return, his countenance betrayed a respectful and astonished admiration, and it was with a shade of embarrassment that he said:

"You can scarcely blame an old man for being a little like St. Thomas. I have touched it with my fingers, and now I am content to follow you."

The young policeman could not, indeed, blame his colleague for his incredulity.

"Then," Lecoq continued, "the accomplice, who had heard the fugitives coming ran to meet them, and he aided the woman with the large feet in carrying her companion. The latter must have been really ill, for the accomplice took off his hat and used it in brushing the snow from this plank. Then, thinking the surface was not yet dry enough, he wiped it with the skirt of his overcoat. Were these civilities pure gallantry, or the usual attentions of an inferior? I have asked myself that question.

"This much, however, is certain: while the woman with the small feet was recovering her strength, half reclining upon this board, the other took the accomplice a little to one side, five or six steps away to the left, just by that enormous block of granite.

"There she talked with him, and, as he listened, the man leaned upon the snow-covered stone. His hand left a very distinct imprint there. Then, as the conversation continued, he rested his elbow upon the snowy surface."

Like all men of limited intelligence, Father Absinthe had suddenly passed from unreasoning distrust to unquestioning confidence.

Henceforth he would believe anything, from the same reason that had, at first, made him believe nothing.

With no idea of the bounds of human reasoning and penetration, he saw no limits to the conjectural genius of his companion.

With perfect faith, therefore, he inquired:

"And what was the accomplice saying to the woman with the broad shoes?"

If Lecoq smiled at this naivete, the other did not suspect it.

"It is rather difficult for me to answer that question," he replied. "I think, however, that the woman was explaining to the man the immensity and imminence of the danger that threatened his companion, and that they were trying to devise some means to rescue him from it. Perhaps she brought him orders given by the murderer. It is certain that she ended by beseeching the accomplice to run to the Poivriere and see what was passing there. And he did so, for his tracks start from this block of granite"

"And only to think," exclaimed the officer, "that we were in the hovel at that very moment. A word from Gevrol, and we might have had handcuffs on the whole gang! How unfortunate!"

Lecoq was not sufficiently disinterested to share his companion's regret.

On the contrary, he gave heartfelt thanks for Gevrol's blunder. Had it not been for that, how would he ever have found an opportunity of interesting himself in an affair that grew more and more mysterious, but which he hoped to fathom finally.

"To conclude," he resumed, "the accomplice soon returned, he had witnessed the scene, he was afraid, and he hastened back He feared that the thought of exploring the premises might enter the minds of the police. It was to the lady with small feet that he addressed himself. He explained the necessity of flight, and told her that even a moment's delay might be fatal. At his words, she summoned all her energy; she rose, and hastened, clinging to the arm of her companion.

Did the man indicate the route they were to take, or did they know it themselves? This much is certain; he accom-

panied them some distance, in order to watch over them.

"But above the duty of protecting these women, he had a still more sacred duty to perform—that of succoring his accomplice, if possible. He retraced his steps, passed here again, and the last foot-print that I can discover leads in the direction of the Rue du Chateau-des-Rentiers. He wished to know what would become of the murderer, and went to place himself in his path."

Like a dilettante who can scarcely restrain his applause until the close of the *morceau* that delights him, Father Absinthe had been unable to repress his admiration entirely.

But it was not until Lecoq ceased speaking that he gave full vent to his enthusiasm.

"Here is a detective!" he exclaimed. "And they say that Gevrol is shrewd! What has he ever done to compare with this? Ah! shall I tell you what I think? Very well. In comparison with you, the General is only John the Baptist."

Certainly the flattery was gross, but it was impossible to doubt its sincerity. This was the first time that the balmy dew of praise had fallen upon Lecoq's vanity, it delighted him

"Nonsense," he replied, modestly; "you are too kind, papa. After all, what have I done that is so very clever? I told you that the man was of middle age. It was not difficult to see that after one had examined his heavy and rather dragging step. I told you that he was tall—an easy matter. When I saw that he had been leaning upon that block of granite there to the left, I measured the aforesaid block. It was sixty-seven *metres* in height, consequently a man who could rest his elbow upon it must be at least six feet high. The impress of his hand proves that I am not mistaken. On seeing that he had brushed away the snow which covered the plank, I asked myself what he had used; I thought that it might be his cap, and the mark left by the visor proves that I was right.

"Finally, if I have discovered the color and the material of his overcoat, it is only because when he wiped off the wet board, some splinters of the wood tore off a few tiny flakes of brown wool, which I found, and which will figure in the trial. But what does this amount to, after all? Nothing. We have discovered only the first elements of the affair. We hold the clue, however; we will follow it to the end. Onward, then!"

The old officer was electrified, and, like an echo, he repeated:

"Forward!"

CHAPTER V.

THAT night the vagabonds, who had taken refuge in the neighborhood of the Poivriere, slept but little, and that an uneasy slumber, broken by sudden starts, and troubled with frightful dreams of a descent of the police upon them.

Awakened by the report of the murderer's pistol, and supposing it the result of a collision between the police and some of their own comrades, most of the frequenters of the locality prowled about eagerly listening and watching, and ready to take flight at the least sign of danger.

At first they could discover nothing at all suspicious.

But later, about two o'clock in the morning, just as they were beginning to feel secure again, the fog lifted a little, and they witnessed a phenomenon well calculated to arouse their anxiety.

Upon the unoccupied tract of land, which the people of that quarter called "the plain," a small but very bright light was seen describing the most capricious evolutions.

It moved here and there without any apparent aim, tracing the most inexplicable zig-zags, sometimes sinking to the earth, sometimes rising, sometimes motionless, and the next second flying off like a ball.

In spite of the place and the season of the year, the less ignorant among the vagabonds believed it to be the light of the *ignis-fatuus*, one of those luminous meteors that rise from the marshes and float about in the atmosphere at the bidding of the wind.

This *ignis-fatuus* was the lantern by whose light the two policemen were pursuing their investigations.

Before leaving the cabin where he had so suddenly revealed himself to his first disciple, Lecoq found himself involved in a cruel perplexity.

He had not the boldness and promptness of decision that is the gift of a prosperous past; and he was hesitating between two undertakings, which were equally reasonable, and each of which offered equally strong probabilities of success.

He stood there between two paths, that made by the two women on the one side, that made by the accomplice on the other

Which should he take? For he could not hope to follow both.

Seated upon the plank where the woman had rested a few moments before, with his hand pressed upon his forehead, he reflected; he weighed his chances.

"If I follow the man I shall learn nothing that I do not know already. He has gone to hover round the party; he has followed them at a distance; he has seen them lock up his accomplice, and he

is undoubtedly prowling around the station-house. If I hurried in pursuit could I hope to overtake him, to capture him? No; too long a time has elapsed."

Father Absinthe lisetned to the monologue with intense curiosity, as anxious as an unsophisticated person who is questioning a clairvoyant in regard to some lost articles, and who is awaiting the response of the oracle.

"To follow the woman," continued the young man, "to what would that lead? Perhaps to an important discovery; perhaps to nothing."

He preferred the unknown with all its chances of failure, and all its chances of success, as well.

He rose; his course was decided.

"Ah, well!" he exclaimed, "I choose the unknown. We are going, Father Absinthe, to follow the foot-prints of these two women, and wherever they lead us we will go."

Inspired with equal ardor they began their walk. At the end of the path upon which they had entered they perceived, as in a magic glass, the one, the fruits, the other, the glory of success.

They hurried forward. At first it was only play to follow the distinct foot-prints that led towards the Seine.

But it was not long before they were obliged to proceed more slowly.

On leaving the waste ground they arrived at the outer limits of civilization, so to speak; and strange foot-prints mingled constantly with the foot-prints of the fugitives, mixking with them, and sometimes effacing them.

In many localities, on account of exposure, or the nature of the soil, the thaw had done its work, and there were large patches of ground entirely free from snow.

In such cases they lost the clue, and it took all Lecoq's sagacity, and all his companion's good will, to find it again.

On such occasions Father Absinthe planted his cane in the earth, near the last foot-print that had been discovered, and Lecoq and himself hunted on the ground around this starting point, after the fashion of blood-hounds who have been thrown off the scent.

Then it was that the lantern moved about so strangely.

More than a dozen times, in spite of all their efforts, they would have lost the clue entirely had it not been for the elegant shoes worn by the lady with the little feet.

These had such small and extremely high heels that the impression they left could not be mistaken. They sank down three or four inches in the snow, or in the mud, and their tell-tale impress remained as clear and distinct as that of a seal upon wax.

Thanks to these heels, the pursuers were able to discover that the two fugitives had not gone up the Rue de Patay, as might have been supposed. Probably they had considered the street too much frequented, and too well lighted.

They had only crossed it, just below the Rue de la Croix-Rouge, and had profited by an empty space between two houses to regain the open ground.

"Certainly these women were well acquainted with the lay of the land," murmured Lecoq.

They did indeed know the topography so well that, on quitting the Rue de Patay, they had suddenly turned to the right, in order to avoid several large ditches, which had been opened by persons who were seeking earth to be used in the manufacture of brick.

But the trail was recovered, and they followed it as far as the Rue du Chevaleret.

Here the foot-prints abruptly ceased.

Lecoq discovered eight or ten foot-marks left by the woman who wore the broad shoes, but that was all.

The earth, it is true, was not in a condition to be of much assistance in an exploration of this nature. There had been a great deal of passing in the Rue du Chevaleret, and there was but little snow left on the pavement, and the middle of the street was transformed into a river of slush.

"Did these people recollect, at last, that the snow might betray them? Did they take the middle of the street?" growled the young officer.

Certainly they could not have crossed to a vacant space as they had done just before, for on the other side of the street extended the long wall of a factory.

"Ah!" sighed Father Absinthe, "we have our labor for our pains."

But Lecoq possessed a temperament that refused to acknowledge defeat.

Animated by the cold anger of a man who sees the object which he was about to seize disappear from before his very eyes, he recommenced his search, and was well repaid for his efforts.

"I understand!" he cried suddenly "I comprehend—I see!"

Father Absinthe drew near. *He* did not see nor divine anything; but he no longer doubted the powers of his companion.

"Look there," said Lecoq; "what do you see?"

"Marks left by the wheels of a carriage that turned here."

"Very well, papa; these tracks explain all. When they reached this spot, our fugitives saw the light of an approaching *fiacre*, which was returning to Paris. It was empty; it was their salvation. They waited here, and when it came nearer they called to the coachman. Doubtless they promised him a generous *pour boire*; this is evident, since he consented to go back

again. He turned short here; they entered the carriage, and that is why these foot-prints go no further."

This explanation was not pleasing to his companion.

"Have we made any great progress now that we know that?" he asked.

Lecoq could not restrain an impulse to shrug his shoulder.

"Did you expect that the tracks made by these fugitives would lead us through Paris and up to their very doors?" he asked.

"No; but—"

"Then what would you ask more? Do you think that I shall not know how to find this coachman to-morrow? He was returning with his empty carriage, his day's work was ended; hence, his stable is in this neighborhood. Do you suppose that he will have forgotten that he took up two persons on the Rue du Chevaleret? He will tell us where he deposited them; but that will not do us any good, for they, of course, have not given him their true address. But he can give us a description of them, tell us how they were dressed and describe their appearance, their manner, and their age. And with that, and what we already know———"

An eloquent gesture expressed the remainder of his thought; then he added;

"We must now go back to the Poivriere, and go quickly. And you my friend, may now extinguish your lantern."

CHAPTER VI.

WHILE doing his best to keep pace with his companion, who was in such haste to get back to the Poivriere that he almost ran, Father Absinthe's thoughts were as busy as his legs, and an entirely new idea was awakened in his mind.

During the twenty-five years that he had been connected with the police force, the good man—to use his own expression—had seen many of his colleagues walk over his body, and win, after only a few months' work, a promotion that his long years of service had not gained for him.

In these cases he had not failed to accuse his superiors of injustice, and his fortunate rivals of gross flattery.

In his opinion, seniority was the only claim to advancement—the only, the best, the most respectable claim.

When he said; "It is infamous to pass over an old member of the service," he summed up his opinions, his griefs, and all his bitterness in that one sentence.

Ah, well! to-night Father Absinthe discovered that there is something beyond seniority, and that there might be good and sufficient reasons for what he had formerly regarded as favoritism. He secretly confessed that this new-comer, whom he had treated so carelessly, had just followed up a clue as he, veteran though he was, would never have succeeded in doing.

But communing with himself was not this good man's forte; he soon began to weary of it, and on reaching a place where they were obliged to proceed more slowly on account of the badness of the road, he deemed it a favorable opportunity to resume the conversation.

"You say nothing, comrade," he ventured, "and one might swear that you were not content."

This surprising result of the old man's reflections would have amazed Lecoq, if his mind had not been a hundred leagues away.

"Really, I am not content," he responded.

"And why, pray? Only ten minutes ago you were as gay as a lark."

"Then I did not see the misfortune that threatens us."

"A misfortune!"

"A very great misfortune. Do you not perceive that the weather has undeniably moderated. It is evident that the wind is from the south. The fog has disappeared, but the sky is cloudy and the weather is threatening. It will rain in less than an hour."

"A few drops are falling now; I just felt one."

These words produced much the same effect on Lecoq that a blow of a whip produces on a spirited horse. He sprang forward, and, adopting a still more hurried pace, he exclaimed:

"Let us make haste! let us make haste!"

The old policeman followed him as in duty bound; but his mind was, if possible, still more troubled by the replies of his young companion.

A great misfortune! The wind from the south! Rain! He did not see, and he could not see the connection.

Greatly puzzled, and not a little anxious, he asked an explanation, although he had but little more breath then was necessary to enable him to continue the forced march that he was making.

"Upon my word," said he, "I have racked my brains—"

His companion took pity on his anxiety.

"What!" he exclaimed, as he hastened forward, "you do not understand that our investigation, my success, and your reward, are dependent upon those black clouds which the wind is driving towards us!"

"Oh!"

"Twenty minutes of even a gentle rain, and our time and our labor will be lost. If it rains, the snow will melt, and farewell to our proofs. Let us go on—let us go on more quickly! You know very well that in such cases it is necessary to

bring something more than words. If we declare to the coroner that we have seen these footprints, he will ask, where? And what can we say? If we swear by all the gods that we have seen the footprints of a man and of two women, the judge will say, 'Let me see them.' And who would feel sheepish then! Father Absinthe and Lecoq. Besides, Gevrol would not fail to declare that we were saying what was not true, in order to enhance our own value, and to humilate him."

"For example!"

"Faster, papa, faster; you will have all day to-morrow to be indignant. Perhaps it will not rain. In that case, these perfect, clear, and recognizable footprints will be the ruin of the culprits. How can we preserve them? By what process could we solidify them? I would deluge them with my blood if that would cause them to congeal."

Father Absinthe was thinking that his share of the labor thus far had been the least important.

He had held the lantern.

But here was a chance for him to acquire a real and substantial right to the prospective reward.

"I know," he declared, "a method by which one could preserve these marks in the snow."

At these words the younger man stopped short.

"Do you know—you?" he interrupted.

"Yes, I know," replied the old officer, with the evident satisfaction of a man who has gained his revenge. "They invented a way at the time of that affair at the White House. It occurred last winter, in the month of December."

"I recollect."

"Ah! well, there was upon the snow in the courtyard an impress that attracted the attention of a detective. He said that the whole evidence depended upon that alone, and that it was worth more than ten years of hard work in following up the case. Naturally he desired to preserve it. They sent for a great chemist—"

"Go on, go on."

"I have never seen the method put into practice, but an expert told me all about it, and showed me the mold they obtained. He even told me that he explained it to me fully, on account of my profession, and for my instruction."

Lecoq was trembling with impatience.

"And how did they obtain the mold?" he asked brusquely.

"Wait; I was just going to explain. They take cards of the best gelatine, and they allow it to soak in cold water. When it becomes thoroughly softened, they heat it until it forms a liquid not too thin, nor too thick. They allow this to cool until it is just cool enough, and then pour a nice little covering of it upon the footprint—"

Lecoq felt the irritation that is natural to a person after he has listened to a bad joke, or when one finds that one has lost time in listening to a fool.

"Enough!" he interrupted, angrily. "That is Hugonlin's method; it can be found in all the manuals. It is excellent, no doubt, but how can it serve us? Have you any gelatine about you?"

"No."

"Nor have I. You might as well have counselled me to pour melted lead upon the foot-prints to fix them."

They continued their way, and five minutes later, without having exchanged another word, they re-entered the Widow Chupin's hovel.

The first impulse of the older man would have been to rest, to breathe. Lecoq did not give him time to do so.

"Make haste; get me an earthen dish, a plate, a vase; bring me some water; gather together all the boards and old boxes you can find lying about."

While his companion was obeying him, Lecoq armed himself with a fragment of one of the broken bottles, and began scraping away furiously at the plastered wall that separated the two rooms.

His intelligence, disconcerted at first by the imminence of the unexpected catastrophe, had regained its equilibrium. He had reflected; he had thought of a way by which failure might possibly be averted—and he hoped.

When he had accumulated at his feet seven or eight handfuls of the fine plaster-dust, he mixed half of it with a little water, forming a thin paste, and he left the rest untouched on the side of the plate.

"Now, papa," said he, "come and hold the light for me."

When once in the garden, the young man sought for the deepest and most distinct of the foot-prints, knelt beside it, and began his experiment, trembling with anxiety,

He then sprinkled upon the impression a fine coating of the dry plaster, then upon this coating, with infinite care, he poured his liquid solution drop by drop.

What happiness! the experiment was successful! It united in a homogeneous mass, forming a perfect model of the impress. And after an hour's labor, he possessed half a dozen of these casts, which might, perhaps, be a little wanting in clearness of outline, but which were quite perfect enough to be used as evidence.

Lecoq had reason for his alarm; it was already beginning to rain.

He had, however, plenty of time to cover with the boxes and pieces of board which Father Absinthe had collected a number of these foot-prints, which he

had, so to speak, put beyond the reach of a thaw.

Now he could breathe. The coroner might come.

CHAPTER VII.

It was some distance from the Poivriere to the Rue du Chevaleret, even by way of the plain that made any *detours* unnecessary.

It had taken at least four hours for Lecoq and his colleague to collect their elements of information.

And, meantime, the Widow Chupin's cabin had remained open, accessible to any chance visitor.

Still, when the young policeman had on his return remembered this neglect of the first precautions, he did not feel alarmed.

Considering all the circumstances, it was very difficult to believe that any serious harm could have resulted from this carelessness.

For who would have been likely, after the hour of midnight, to visit this drinking saloon? Its bad name erected a sort of bulwark around it. The most daring of vagrants did not drink there without some disquietude, fearing, if the liquor caused them to lose consciousness, that they might be robbed or perhaps murdered.

Hence it could have been only a very reckless person who, feeling a few *sous* left in his pocket on returning late at night from the ball at the Rainbow, would have been attracted to this notoriously dangerous saloon by the light that streamed through the open door.

But a single glance at the interior would have been enough to put the bravest to flight.

In less than a second the young policeman had weighed all these possibilities, but he had not breathed a word to Father Absinthe.

When, little by little, the excitement caused by his hopes and his success in his experiment had died away, and he had returned to his habitual calmness, he made a careful inspection of the abode, and was by no means satisfied with his conduct.

He had experimented upon Father Absinthe with his new system of investigation, as an apprentice in the tribune tries his powers before his least gifted friends, not before the best.

He had overwhelmed the veteran by his superiority; he had crushed him.

Great merit and wonderful victory! Father Absinthe was a fool; he, Lecoq, thought himself very fine—was there any reason why he should boast?

If he could only give some startling proofs of his energy or of his penetration! But what had he accomplished? Was the mystery solved? Was his success more than problematical? When one thread is drawn out, the skein is not untangled.

This night would undoubtedly decide his future as a detective, so he swore that if he could not conquer his vanity, he would, at least, oblige himself to conceal it.

Hence it was in a very modest tone that he addressed his companion.

"We have done all that we can outside," said he; "now would it not be wise to busy ourselves with the interior?"

Everything looked exactly as it did when the two men left the room. A candle, whose wick was smoking and charred, threw its red light upon the same scene of disorder, and upon the rigid features of the three victims.

Without losing a moment, Lecoq began to pick up and to study all the objects scattered upon the floor. Some of these still remained intact. It seemed that the Widow Chupin had recoiled from the expense of a brick floor, judging the ground upon which the cabin was built quite good enough for the feet of her customers. The ground, which must have been solid and beaten down originally, had by use, by the damp weather and the thaw, become scarcely less muddy than the plain itself.

The first fruits of his search were a large salad-bowl, and a big iron spoon, which was too much twisted and bent not to have been used as a weapon during the conflict.

It was evident that when the quarrel began the victims were regaling themselves with that mixture of water, wine and sugar, known along the barriere under the name of wine *a la Francaise*.

After the salad-bowl, the two men picked up five of those horrible glasses used in drinking saloons, heavy and very thick at the bottom, which look as if they ought to contain half a bottle, but which, in reality, contain almost nothing. Three were broken, two were whole.

There had been wine in these five glasses—the same wine *a la Francaise*. They could see it; but, for greater surety, Lecoq applied his tongue to the bluish mixture remaining in the bottom of each glass.

"The devil!" he murmured. with an astonished air.

Then he examined successively the bottoms of all the over-turned tables. Upon one of these, the one nearest the fire-place and the window, they could distinguish the still wet marks of the five glasses, of the salad-bowl, and even of the spoons.

This circumstance the young officer very properly regarded as a matter of the greatest importance, for it proved clearly

that five persons had emptied the salad-bowl in company. But which persons?

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed Lecoq in two entirely different tones. "Then the two women could not have been with the murderer!"

A very simple mode of discovery had presented itself. It was to see what the other glasses had contained. They discovered one, similar in form to the others, but much smaller. It had contained brandy.

Then these women had not been with the murderer, therefore he could not have fought because the other men had insulted them.

This discovery had suddenly proved the incorrectness of his suppositions. It was an unexpected check, and he was mourning over it in silence, when Father Absinthe, who had not ceased ferreting about, uttered a cry of surprise.

The young man turned; he saw that his companion had become very pale.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Some one has been here in our absence."

"Impossible!"

It was not impossible—it was true.

When Gevrol had torn the apron off of Widow Chupin, he had thrown it upon the steps of the stairs; neither of the policemen had touched it afterwards. Ah, well! the pockets of this apron had been turned inside out; this was a proof, this was evidence.

Lecoq was overcome with consternation, and the contraction of his features revealed the struggle in his mind.

"Who could have been here?" he murmured. "Robbers? That is improbable."

Then after a long silence, which his companion took good care not to interrupt;

"The person who came here, who dared to penetrate this abode guarded by the corses of these murdered men—this person could have been none other than the accomplice. But it is not enough to suspect this, it is necessary to know it. I must know. I will know!"

They searched for a long time, and it was not until after an hour ot earnest work that, in front of the door forced open by the police, they discovered in the mud, just inside the marks made by Gevrol's stamping, a foot-print that bore a close resemblance to those left by the man who had entered the garden.

They compared the impressions and recognized the same designs formed by the nails upon the sole of the boot.

"It must have been he!" exclaimed Lecoq. "He watched us, he saw us go away, and he entered here. But why? What pressing, irresistible necessity made him decide to brave such imminent danger."

He seized his companion's hand, and nearly crushing it in his excitement;

"Why?" continued he, violently. "Ah! I understand only too well. There had been left, or forgotten or lost here, some article that would have served to throw light on this horrible affair. And to obtain it, to find it, he decided to run this terrible risk. And to think that it was my fault, my fault alone, that this convincing proof escaped us! And I thought myself so shrewd! What a lesson! The door should have been locked; any fool would have thought of it—"

He checked himself, and remained with open mouth and distended eyes, pointing with his finger to one of the corners of the room.

"What is the matter?" demanded his frightened companion.

Lecoq made no reply, but slowly and with the stiff movements of a somnambulist, he approached the spot to which he had pointed, stooped, picked up something, and said:

"My folly does not deserve this good fortune."

The object he had picked up was an ear-ring of the sort that jewellers call buttons. It was composed of a single very large diamond. The setting was of marvelous workmanship.

"This diamond," he declared, after a moment's examination, "must be worth at least five or six thousand francs."

"Are you in earnest?"

' I think I would be willing to take my oath on it."

He had not said "I think," a few hours before; he had said very boldly, "I swear." But the first mistake was a lesson that would not be forgotten so long as he lived.

"Perhaps it was the same diamond ear-ring that the accomplice came to seek."

"This supposition is scarcely admissible. In that case, he would not have sought for it in Mother Chupin's apron. No, he must have been seeking something else—a letter, for example."

The older man was not listening; he had taken the ear-ring, and was examining it in his turn.

"And to think," he murmured, astonished by the brilliancy of the stone, "to think that a woman who had ten thousand francs' worth of jewels in her ears should have come to the Poivriere. Who would have believed it?"

Lecoq shook his head thoughtfully. "Yes, it is very strange, very improbable, very absurd. And yet we shall see many things as strange if we ever arrive—which I very much doubt—at a solution of this mysterious affair."

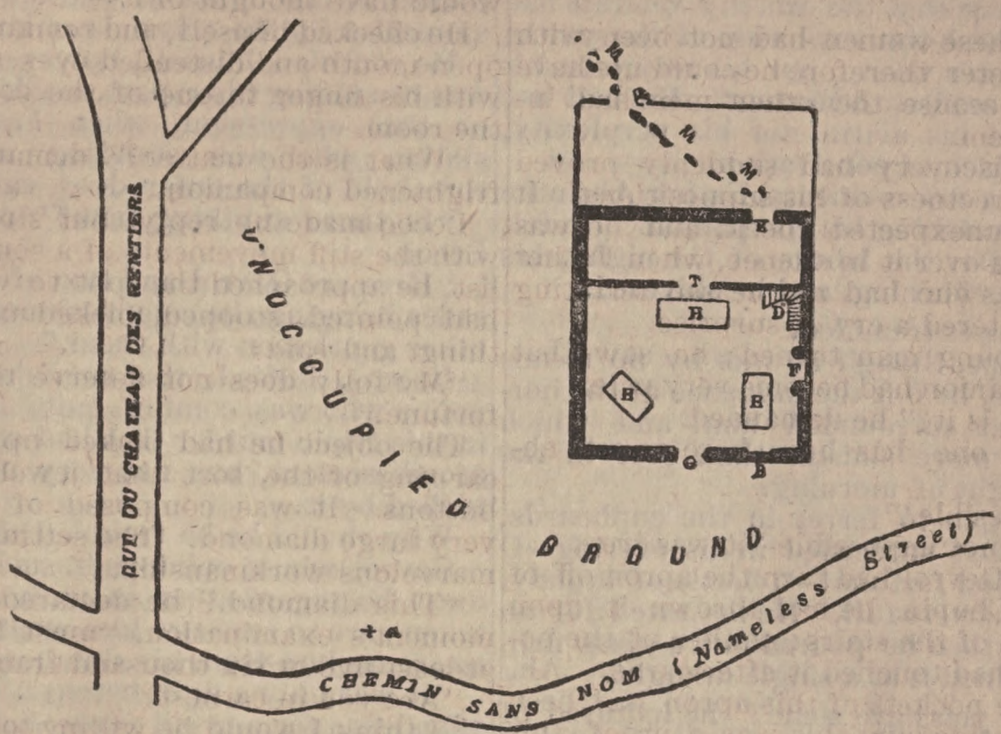
CHAPTER VIII.

DAY was breaking, raw, cheerless, and gloomy, when Lecoq and his colleague concluded their investigation.

There was not an inch of space that had not been explored, carefully examined, and studied, one might almost say, with a magnifying glass.

There remained now only to make the report.

The younger man seated himself at the table, and began by drawing a plan of the scene of the murder, which would, of course, be of great service in making others understand his recital.



A.—The point where the squad of police, under command of Inspector Gevrol, heard the cries of the victims.

(The distance from this point to the hut known as the Poivriere is only one hundred and twenty-three yards; hence, it may reasonably be supposed that these cries were the first that were uttered, and consequently that the combat had just commenced.)

B.—The window covered with shutters, through the openings of which one of the police was able to see the scene within.

C.—The door forced open by Inspector Gevrol.

D.—Staircase upon which the Widow Chupin was seated, crying

(It was upon the third step of this staircase that the Widow Chupin's apron was afterwards found, the pockets turned inside out.)

F.—Fire-place.

HHH.—Tables.

(The remnants of the salad-bowl and of the five glasses were found scattered on the floor between the points F. and B.)

T.—Door communicating with the back room of the hovel, before which the armed murderer was standing

K.—Back door of the hut, opening into the garden, by which the agent of police, who thought of cutting off the murderer's retreat, entered.

L.—Gate of the garden, opening upon the unoccupied ground.

MM.—Footprints on the snow, discovered by the policeman remaining at the Poivriere, after the departure of Inspector Gevrol.

Thus it will be seen that in this explanatory chart Lecoq had not once written his name.

In noting the things that he had imagined or discovered, he referred to himself simply as one of the police.

This was not modesty so much as calculation By hiding one's self on well-chosen occasions, one gains greater notoriety when one emerges from the shadow.

It was also through cunning that he gave Gevrol such a prominent position.

These tactics, rather subtle, perhaps, but after all perfectly fair, could not fail to call attention to the man who had shown himself so efficient when the efforts of his chief had been confined only to breaking open the door.

The document he drew up was not a verbal process, an act reserved for the officers of the police judiciary—it was a simple report, that would be admitted under the title of an inquiry and yet he composed it with the same care a young general would have displayed in the bulletin of his first victory.

While he was drawing and writing, Father Absinthe leaned over his shoulder to watch him,

The plan amazed that worthy man.

He had seen a great deal; but he had always supposed that it was necessary to be an engineer, an architect, or, at least, a carpenter, to execute such a work. Not at all. With a tape-line with which to take some measurements, and a bit of board in place of a rule, this inexperienced colleague had accomplished the miracle.

His respect for Lecoq was greatly augmented.

It is true that the worthy veteran had not noticed the explosion of the young policeman's vanity, nor his return to his former modest demeanor. He had not observed his alarm, nor his perplexity, nor his lack of penetration.

After a few moments, Father Absinthe ceased watching his companion. He felt weary after the labors of the night, his head was burning, and he shivered.

His knees trembled.

Perhaps, though he was by no means sensitive, he felt the influence of the horrors that surrounded him, and which seemed more sinister than ever in the bleak light of morning.

He began to ferret in the cupboards, and at last succeeded in discovering—O great good fortune!—a bottle of brandy, three quarters full. He hesitated for an instant, then he poured out a glass full, and drained it at a single draught.

"Will you have some?" he inquired of his companion. "It is not a very famous brand, to be sure; but it is just as good, it makes one's blood circulate and enlivens one."

Lecoq refused; he did not need to be enlivened. All his faculties were hard at work. He intended that, after a single reading of the report, the judge should say: "Let the officer who has drawn up this document be sent for." His future depended upon this order.

He endeavored to be brief, clear and concise, to plainly indicate how his suspicions on the subject of the murder had been aroused, how they had increased, and how they had been confirmed. He explained by what series of deductions he had succeeded in establishing a truth which, if it was not the truth, was at least plausible enough to serve as the basis of further investigation.

Then he enumerated the articles of conviction ranged on the table before him.

There were the flakes of brown wool collected upon the plank, the valuable ear-ring, the models of the different foot-prints in the garden, and Widow Chupin's apron with its pockets turned inside out.

There was also the murderer's pistol, of whose five barrels three were still undischarged.

This weapon, although unornamented, was remarkably well finished, and bore the name of one of the best armorers in London: Stephen, 14 Skinner street.

Lecoq felt convinced that by examining the bodies of the victims he would find other, and perhaps very valuable information; but this he dared not do. He was still too inexperienced to hazard such a step. Besides, he understood if he ran such a risk, Gevrol, furious at his own mistake, would not fail to declare that, by changing the attitude of the bodies, he had rendered a satisfactory examination by the physicians impossible.

He consoled himself, however, and he was re-reading his report, modifying this or that expression, when Father Absinthe, who was standing upon the threshold of the outer door, called him.

"Is there anything new?" responded Lecoq.

"Here are Gevrol and two of our comrades bringing the commissioner and two other gentlemen with them."

It was, indeed, the commissioner of police who was coming, quite interested in this triple murder that had stained his arondissement, but not very much disturbed by it.

Why should he be troubled about it?

Gevrol, whose opinions in such matters must be regarded as an authority, had taken care to reassure him when he went to arouse him from his slumbers.

"It was only a fight between some old offenders; former jail birds, habitues of the Poivriere," he had said to him.

"If all these wretches would kill one another, we might have some peace."

He added that the murderer had been arrested and placed in confinement, and consequently the case was not urgent.

The commissioner therefore saw nothing improper in waiting until morning before beginning the inquest.

He had seen the murderer, reported the case, and now he was coming—not in too much haste—accompanied by two physicians who had been appointed by the government attorney to make *medico-legales* reports in such cases.

They were also accompanied by a sergeant-major of the 53d regiment of light infantry, summoned by the commissioner to identify, if possible, the murdered man, who wore a uniform, and who, if one might believe the number engraved upon the buttons of his overcoat, belonged to the 53d regiment, now stationed at the fort.

Inspector Gevrol was even less disturbed than the commissioner.

He whistled as he walked along, flourishing his cane, which never left his hand, and making merry at the discomfiture of the presumptuous fool who had desired to remain to glean where he, the experienced and skilful officer, had perceived nothing.

As soon as he was within hearing dis-

tance, the inspector called to Father Absinthe, who, after warning Lecoq, remained on the threshold, leaning against the door-post, puffing his pipe, as immovable as a sphinx.

"Ah, well, old man!" cried Gevrol, "have you any great melodrama, very dark and very mysterious, to relate to us.

"I myself have nothing to relate, replied the worthy addressed, without even drawing his pipe from his lips; "I am too stupid; that is perfectly understood. But Monsieur Lecoq will tell you something that will astonish you."

This title, "monsieur," which the old policeman bestowed upon his colleague, displeased Gevrol so much that he pretended not to understand.

"Who?" said he, "of whom are you speaking?"

"Of my colleague, of course, who is now busy finishing his report—of Monsieur Lecoq."

Although unintentionally, the good man had certainly become the young policeman's god-father. From that day forward, to his enemies as well as to his friends, he was, and he remained, Monsieur Lecoq.

"Ah! ah!" said the inspector whose hearing was evidently impaired. "Ah, he has discovered—"

"The pot of roses which others did not scent, General."

By this remark Father Absinthe made an enemy of his superior officer. But Lecoq had won him entirely. He had taken sides with Lecoq, and *to* Lecoq, against every one else, if necessary, he had determined to attach himself, and to share good fortune or bad fortune with him.

"We will see," murmured the inspector, mentally resolving to have an eye on this youth whom success might transform into a rival.

He said no more. The little party which he preceded had arrived, and he stood aside to make way for the commissioner of police.

This commissioner was not a *debutant*. He had served for many years, and yet he could not repress a movement of horror on entering the Poivriere.

The sergeant-major of the 53d who followed him, an old soldier decorated and medaled, was still more overcome with horror. He became as pale as the corses that were lying there, and was obliged to lean against the wall for support.

Only the two physicians retained their stoical indifference.

Lecoq had risen, his report in his hand; he had bowed, and assuming a respectful attitude, was waiting to be interrogated.

"You must have passed a frightful night," said the commissioner, kindly; "and quite unnecessarily, since any investigation was superfluous."

"I think, however," replied the young man, armed with diplomacy, "that my time has not been entirely lost. I have conformed to the instruction of my superior officer; I have searched the premises thoroughly, and I have ascertained many things. I have, for example, acquired the certainty that the murderer had a friend, possibly an accomplice, of whom I can give quite a close description. He must have been of middle age, and wore, if I am not mistaken, a soft cap and a brown woolen overcoat; as for his boots—"

"Thunder!" exclaimed Gevrol, "and I—"

He stopped short, like a man whose impulse had exceeded his discretion, and who would have gladly taken back his words.

"And you?" questioned the commissioner. "What do you mean?"

Furious, but having gone to far to draw back, the inspector was obliged to act as his own executioner.

"I was about to say that this morning, about an hour ago, while I was waiting for you, Monsieur le Commissaire, before the station-house of the Barriere d'Italie, where the murderer is confined, I saw at some little distance an individual whose appearance was not unlike that of the man described by Lecoq. This man appeared to be greatly intoxicated; he reeled and staggered against the walls. He tried to cross the street, but fell down in the middle of it, in such a position that he would inevitably have been crushed by the first passing vehicle."

Lecoq turned away his head; he did not wish them to read in his eyes how perfectly he understood the whole game.

"Seeing this," pursued Gevrol, "I called two men and asked them to aid me in raising the poor wretch. We went to him; he had apparently fallen asleep: we shook him—we made him sit up; we told him that he could not remain there, but immediately he flew into a furious rage. He swore at us, he threatened us, he tried to fight us. And, upon my word! we took him to the station-house, and left him there to recover from his debauch.

"Did you shut him up in the same room with the murderer?" inquired Lecoq.

"Naturally. You know very well there are but two cages in the station-house at the barriere—one for the men, the other for the women; consequently———"

The commissioner seemed thoughtful. "Ah! this is very unfortunate," he murmured; "and there is no remedy."

"Pardon me, there is one," objected Gevrol, "I can send one of my men to the station-house with an order to detain the drunken man———"

Lecoq interrupted him with a gesture.

"Trouble lost," he said coldly. "If this individual is an accomplice, he has become sober, rest assured of that, and is far away by this time."

"Then what is one to do?" demanded the inspector, with an ironical air. "May one be permitted to inquire the opinion of Monsieur Lecoq?"

"I think chance offered us a splendid opportunity, and we did not know how to seize it; and that the best thing we can do now is to make our period of mourning for it as short as possible, and to stand ready to embrace the next opportunity that offers itself."

Gevrol was, however, determined to send one of his men to the station-house; and when the messenger had departed, Lecoq commenced the reading of his report.

He read it rapidly, refraining as much as possible from placing the decisive proofs in strong relief, reserving these for his own benefit; but so strong was the logic of his deductions, that he was frequently interrupted by approving remarks from the commissioner, and by the "very well!" of the physicians.

Gevrol, who alone represented the opposition, elevated his shoulders until they entirely concealed his neck, and became literally green with jealousy.

The report concluded:

"I think that you alone, young man, have judged correctly in this affair," said the commissioner. "I may be mistaken; but your explanations have made me look at the attitude assumed by the murderer while I was questioning him (which was only for a moment), in an entirely different light. He refused, obstinately refused, to make any reply to my questions. He would not even consent to tell his name."

He was silent for a moment, reviewing the past circumstances in his mind, and it was in a serious tone that he added.

"We are, I feel convinced, in the presence of one of those mysterious crimes, the causes of which are beyond the reach of human sagacity—one of those mysterious cases which human justice never can reach."

Lecoq hid a slight smile.

"Oh!" thought he, "we will see about that."

CHAPTER IX.

No consultation held at the bedside of a man dying of some unknown disease ever took place in the presence of two physicians so utterly unlike as those who, upon the requisition of the government attorney, accompanied the commissioner of police.

One, large, old, and totally bald, wore a broad-brimmed hat, and an overcoat of antique cut, over his ill-fitting black coat. He was one of those modest *savants* whom one encounters sometimes in the by-places of Paris—one of those healers devoted to their art, who too often die in obscurity, after rendering immense service to mankind.

He had the gracious calmness of a man who, having seen much of human misery, comprehended everything; and no troubled conscience could sustain his searching glance, which was as keen as his lancet.

The other, young, fresh, light-haired, and jovial, was even foppishly attired; and his white hands were encased in handsome fur gloves. His glance was ever caressing or smiling. He was a man who would have been likely to recommend all those infallible panaceas invented each month in the chemist's laboratories and advertised on the fourth page of the newspapers. He had probably written more than one article upon "Medicine for the use of all mankind."

"I will request you, gentlemen, to begin your duties by examining that one of the victims who wears the military costume. Here is a sergeant-major summoned to answer a question of identity, whom I must send back to his quarters as soon as possible."

The two physicians responded with a gesture of assent, and aided by Father Absinthe and another agent of police, they lifted the body and laid it upon two tables, which had previously been placed end to end.

They were not obliged to make any note of the attitude in which they found the body, since the unfortunate man, who was still alive when the police entered the cabin, had been moved before he expired.

"Approach, sergeant," ordered the commissioner, "and look carefully at this man.

It was with very evident repugnance that the old soldier obeyed.

"What is the uniform that he wears?"

"It is the uniform of the 53d regulars, 2d battalion, company of light infantry."

"Do you recognize him?"

"Not at all."

"Are you sure that he does not belong to your regiment?"

"I cannot say certainly; there are some conscripts at the depot whom I have never seen. But I am ready to swear that he has never formed a part of the 2d battalion—which, by the way, is mine—in the division of light infantry, of which I am sergeant-major."

Lecoq, who had until now remained in the background, stepped forward.

"It might be well," he suggested, "to note the numbers marked upon the other articles of clothing."

"That is a very good idea," said the commissioner, approvingly.

"Here is his hat," added the young policeman. "It bears the number 3,129."

They followed Lecoq's advice, and soon discovered that each article of clothing upon the unfortunate man bore a different number.

"*Mon Dieu!*" murmured the sergeant; "there is every indication—— But it is very singular."

Invited to scrupulously verify his assertion, the brave trooper evidently made an effort to collect all his intellectual faculties.

"I would stake my epaulettes that this man never was a soldier," he said at last. "This individual must have disguised himself to take part in the Shrove Sunday carnival."

"Why do you think that?"

"*Dame!* I know this better than I can explain it. I know it by his hair, by his nails, by his whole appearance, by a certain *je ne sais quoi;* in short I know it by everything and by nothing. And see, the poor devil did not even know how to put on his shoes; he has laced his gaiters wrong side outwards."

Evidently further doubt was impossible after this evidence, which confirmed the truth of Lecoq's first remark to Inspector Gevrol.

"Still, if this person was a civilian, how could he have procured this clothing?" insisted the commissioner. "Could he have borrowed it from the men in your company?"

"Yes, that is barely possible; but it is difficult to believe it."

"Is there no way by which you could ascertain?"

"Oh! very easily. I have only to run over to the fort and order an inspection of clothing."

"Do that," approved the commissioner; "it would be an excellent way of getting at the truth."

But Lecoq had just thought of a method just as convincing, and much more prompt,

"One word, sergeant," said he, "is not the cast off and condemned clothing of your men sold at public auction?"

"Yes; at least once a year, after the inspection."

"And are not the articles thus sold marked in some way?"

"Assuredly."

"Then see of there is not some mark of this kind upon the uniform of this poor wretch."

The officer turned up the collar of his coat and examined the waistband of the pantaloons, and said:

"You are right—these are condemned garments."

The eyes of the young policeman sparkled, but they emitted only a single gleam of triumph.

"We must then believe that this poor devil had purchased this costume," he observed. "Where? Necessarily at the Temple, in the store of one of those merchants who deal in military clothing. There are only five or six of these establishments. I will go from one to another of them, and the person who sold this clothing will certainly recognize it by some trade mark."

"And that will assist us very much," growled Gevrol.

The sergeant-major, to his great relief, received permission to retire, but not without having been warned that very probably the commissioner would require his deposition.

The moment had come to search the body of the pretended soldier, and the commissioner, who performed this duty himself, hoped that some information as to the identity of this man would be revealed.

He proceeded with his task, dictating at the same time to one of the men his *verbal-process;* that is to say, a minute description of all the articles he found upon the dead man's person.

These were: in the right hand pocket of the pantaloons, some smoking tobacco, a pipe, and a few matches; in the left pocket, a very much soiled leather pocket-book, containing seven francs and sixty centimes, and a linen pocket-handkerchief of good quality, but unmarked.

And nothing more!

The commissioner was regretting this, when, on carefully examining the pocket-book, he found a compartment which had at first escaped his notice on account of being hid under a leather flap.

In this compartment was a carefully folded paper. He unfolded it and read the contents aloud:

"My Dear Gustave—Tomorrow, Sunday evening, do not fail to come to the ball at the Rainbow, according to our agreement. If you have no money pass my house, and I will leave some with the concierge, who will give it to you.

Be there at eight o'clock. If I am not already there, it will not be long before I make my appearance. All is well.

"Lacheneur."

Alas! what did this letter reveal? Only that the dead man's name was Gustave; that he had some connection with a man named Lacheneur, who had advanced him money for a certain object; and that they had met at the Rainbow some hours before the murder.

It was little—very little. It was something, however. It was a clue; and in this absolute darkness even the faintest gleam of light was eagerly welcomed.

"Lacheneur!" growled Gevrol; "the

poor devil uttered that name in his last agony."

"Precisely," insisted Father Absinthe; "and he declared that he wished to revenge himself upon him. He accused him of having drawn him into a trap. Unfortunately, death cut his story short."

Lecoq was silent. The commissioner of police had handed him the letter, and he was studying it with the closest attention.

The paper was of the ordinary kind; the ink was blue. In one of the corners was a half-effaced mark, upon which one could distinguish only the name: Beaumarchais.

This was enough for Lecoq.

"This letter," he thought, "was certainly written in a *cafe* on the Boulevard Beaumarchais. In which one? I will find out, for this Lacheneur must be found."

While the men of the prefecture were gathered around the commissioner, holding council and deliberating, the physicians began their delicate and disagreeable task.

With the assistance of the obliging Father Absinthe, they removed the clothing of the pretended soldier, and, bending over their "subject" like surgeons in the schools of anatomy, with sleeves rolled up, they examined, inspected, and appraised him physically.

Very willingly would the artist-doctor have dispensed with these formalities, which he considered very ridiculous, and entirely unnecessary; but the old physician had too high a regard for his profession, and for the duty he had been called upon to fulfil, to neglect the slightest detail.

Minutely, and with the most scrupulous exactitude, he noted the height of the dead man, his supposed age, the nature of his temperament, the color and the length of his hair, and the degree of development of his muscular system.

Then they passed to an examination of the wound.

Lecoq had judged correctly. The doctors declared it a fracture of the base of the skull. It could, they stated in their report, have been caused only by the action of some instrument with a very broad surface, or by a violent knock of the head against some hard substance of considerable magnitude.

But no weapon, other than the revolver, had been found; and that was not heavy enough to produce such a wound.

There must, then, necessarily, have been a hand-to-hand struggle between the pretended soldier and the murderer; and the latter, seizing his adversary by the throat, had dashed him violently against the wall.

The presence of very tiny and very numerous spots of extravasated blood about the neck, made these conclusions extremely plausible.

They did not find any other wound, not a bruise, not a scratch—nothing!

Hence, it was evident that this terrible struggle must have been exceedingly short.

Between the moment when the squad of police had heard the shrieks, and the moment when Lecoq had peered through the shutter and seen the victim fall, this slaughter must have been consummated.

The examination of the other murdered men required different but even greater precautions.

Their position had been respected; they were still lying across the hearth as they had fallen, and their attitude was a matter of great importance, since it would have an important bearing on the case.

And this attitude was such that one could not fail to be impressed with the idea that their death had been instantaneous.

Both of them were stretched out upon their backs, their limbs extended and their hands wide open.

No contraction, no torsion of the muscles, no trace of combat, they had been taken unawares.

The faces of both men expressed the most intense fear. One might suppose, if he believed the theory of Devergie, that the last sentiment they had experienced in life had been neither anger nor hatred, but terror.

"Thus," said the old doctor, "we may reasonably suppose that they must have been stupefied by some entirely unexpected, strange, and frightful spectacle. This terrified expression, written upon their faces, I have noticed more than once upon the features of a woman who suddenly died from the shock she experienced in seeing one of her neighbors enter her house to play a trick upon her, disguised as a phantom."

Lecoq drank in these explanations given by the physicians, and tried to make them conform to the vague hypotheses that were revolving in his own brain.

But who could these individuals be? Would they in death guard the secret of their identity, as the other victim had done?

The first subject examined by the physicians was over fifty years of age. His hair was very thin and quite gray; his face was closely shaven, except for a thick tuft of hair that decorated his rather prominent chin.

He was very poorly clad in pantaloons that hung in rags over boots which were trodden down at the heel, and in a much soiled woolen blouse.

The old doctor declared that this man must have been instantly killed by a bullet; the size of the circular wound, the

absence of blood around its edge, and the blackened and burnt flesh demonstrated this fact with almost mathematical precision.

The great difference in the wounds made by fire-arms, according to the distance from which the death-dealing missile comes, was seen when the physicians began the autopsy of the last of the unfortunates.

The ball that had caused his death had scarcely traversed a yard of space before it reached him, and his wound was not nearly so hideous in aspect as the other.

This individual, who was at least fifteen years younger than his companion, was small and remarkable ugly.

His entirely beardless face was everywhere scarred by the small-pox.

His garb was such as is worn by the worst denizens of the *barriere*. His trousers were of gray checked material, and his blouse was turned back *en revers* at the throat. His boots had been blackened. The little glazed cap that lay on the floor beside him was in harmony with his pretentious coiffure and his gaudy cravat.

But these were all the facts that the physician's report set forth in technical terms; this was all the information that had been obtained by the most careful investigation.

Vainly the pockets of the two men had been explored and turned inside out; they contained nothing that would give the slightest clue to their personality, to their name, to their social position, or to their profession.

Not even the slightest indication— not a letter, not an address, not a fragment of paper; nothing—not even the common articles of personal use, such as a tobacco-box, a knife, a pipe which might be recognized, and thus establish the identity of its owner.

Some tobacco in a paper bag, some pocket-handkerchiefs that were unmarked, some rolls of cigarettes—these were all that had been discovered.

The elder man had sixty-seven francs about him; the younger, two louis.

Rarely had the police found themselves in the presence of so terrible an affair, without some slight clue to guide them.

With the exception of the fact itself, proved only too well by the bodies of the three victims, they were ignorant of everything connected with it, of the circumstances and of the motive, and the probabilities, instead of dissipating the uncertainty, only augmented it.

Certainly they might hope, by the aid of time, strenuous effort, and the powerful means of investigation which they have at their disposal, to finally arrive at the truth.

But, meanwhile, all was mystery—so much so that they could not even say who was to blame.

The murderer had been arrested; but if he persisted in his obstinacy, how were they to ascertain his name? He protested his innocence; how were they to furnish any proofs of his guilt?

They knew nothing in regard to the victims; and one of them had with his dying breath accused himself.

An inexplicable influence tied the tongue of the Widow Chupin.

Two women, one of whom had lost an earring valued at 5,000 francs, had witnessed the struggle—then disappeared. An accomplice, after two acts of unheard of audacity, had made his escape.

And all these people—the women, the murderer, the keeper of the saloon, the accomplice, and the victims — were equally strange and mysterious, equally suspected of *not* being what they seemed to be.

Perhaps the commissioner thought he would spend a very unpleasant quarter of an hour at the prefecture when he reported the case. Certainly he spoke of his impressions on the subject in a very despondent tone.

"It will now be best," he said at last, "to transport these three bodies to the morgue. There they will doubtless be identified."

He reflected a moment, then added:

"And to think that one of these dead men is perhaps Lacheneur himself!"

"That is scarcely possible," said Lecoq. "The disguised soldier, being the last to die, had seen his companions fall. If he had supposed Lacheneur dead, he would not have spoken of vengeance."

Gevrol, who for the past two hours had pretended to pay no attention to the proceedings, now approached. He was not the man to yield even to the strongest evidence.

"If Monsieur le Commissaire will listen to me, he shall hear my opinion, which is a trifle more definite than M. Lecoq's fancies."

The sound of wheels before the door of the cabin interrupted him, and an instant after the judge of instruction* entered the room.

CHAPTER X.

THERE was not a person in the Poivriere who did not know, at least by sight, the judge who had just entered, and Gev-

* In French law, the term "instruction" is applied to the investigation and preparation of a case for trial.

And the judge of instruction is the official charged with collecting proofs and testimony, and in preparing the case for presentation to the court.

rol, an old habitue of the Palais de Justice, murmured his name:

"M. Maurice d'Escorval."

He was the son of that famous Baron d'Escorval, who, in 1815, sealed his devotion to the empire with his blood, and upon whom Napoleon, at St. Helena, pronounced this magnificent eulogium:

"Men as honest as he may, I believe, exist; but more honest, no, it is not possible."

Having entered upon his duties as magistrate early in life, and being endowed with a remarkable talent for his vocation, it had been supposed that he would rise to the most exalted rank in his profession. But he had disappointed such prognostications by resolutely refusing all the more elevated positions that men offered to him, in order to continue his modest but useful functions in the tribunal of the Seine.

To explain his refusals, he said that life in Paris had more charms for him than the most enviable advancement. But it was hard to understand this declaration on his part, for in spite of his brilliant connections and large fortune, he had, since the death of his eldest brother, led a most retired existence, concealing his life, or revealing it only by his untiring labors and the good he did to those around him.

He was now about forty-two years of age, but appeared much younger, although furrows were beginning to show themselves upon his forehead.

One would have admired his face, had it not been for the puzzling immobility that marred its beauty, the sarcastic curl of the thin lips, and the gloomy expression of his pale-blue eyes.

To say that he was cold and grave, did not express the truth; it was saying too little. He was gravity and coldness personified, with a shade of hauteur added.

Impressed by the horror of the scene the instant he placed his foot upon the threshold, M. d'Escorval acknowledged the presence of the physicians and the commissioner only by an abstracted nod of the head. The others in the room had no existence so far as he was concerned.

Already his faculties were at work. He studied the ground, and carefully noted all the surroundings with the attentive sagacity of a judge who realizes the immense weight of even the slightest detail, and who understands the eloquence of circumstantial evidence.

"It is a serious affair," he said, gravely; "very serious."

The commissioner's only response was to lift his eyes to heaven. A gesture that said very plainly:

"I am quite in accord with you!"

The fact is, that for the past two hours the worthy commissioner's responsibility had weighed heavily upon him, and he secretly blessed the judge for relieving him of it.

"The government solicitor was unable to accompany me," resumed M. d'Escorval, "he has not the gift of omnipresence, and I doubt if it is possible for him to join me here. Let us, therefore, begin operations at once."

The curiosity of those present was becoming unendurable; and the commissioner only expressed the general feeling when he said:

"You, sir, have undoubtedly questioned the murderer, and have learned———"

"I have learned nothing." interrupted M. d'Escorval, apparently much astonished at the interuption.

He seated himself, and while his clerk was busy in authenticating the commissioner's *verbal-process*, he began the perusal of the report written by Lecoq.

Pale, agitated and nervous, that young policeman, hidden in a remote corner, tried to read upon the impassive face of the magistrate the impression produced by the document.

It was his future that was at stake—that depended upon this man's approval or disapproval.

It was not with a stupid mind like that of Father Absinthe that he had to deal now, but with a superior intelligence.

"If I could only plead my own cause," he thought. "What are cold written phrases in comparison with spoken. living words, palpitating with emotion and with the convictions of the soul that utters them."

But he was soon reassured.

The face of the judge retained its immobility, but he nodded his head in token of approval, and occasionally some point more ingenious than the others extorted from his lips the exclamation: "Not bad!—very good!"

When he had finished its perusal:

"All this," he remarked to the commissioner, "is quite unlike your report of this morning, which represented this mysterious affair as a low broil between some miserable vagabonds."

This observation was only too just; and the commissioner deeply regretted that he had trusted to the representations of Gevrol, and remained warm in bed.

"This morning," he responded evasively, "I only gave my first impressions. These have been modified by subsequent researches, so that—"

"Oh!" interrupted the judge, "I did not intend to reproach you, on the contrary, I must congratulate you. One could not have done better nor acted more promptly. All this *instruction* shows great penetration and research, and the results are given with unusual clearness and wonderful precision."

Lecoq's head whirled.

The commissioner hesitated for an instant.

He was sorely tempted to confiscate this praise to his own profit.

If he drove away the unworthy thought, it was because he was an honest man, and more than that, because it did not displease him to have an opportunity to do Gevrol a bad turn and punish him for his presumptuous folly.

"I must confess," he said with some hesitation, "that the honor of this investigation does not belong to me."

"To whom, then, shall I attribute it, if not to the inspector?" thought M. d'Escorval, not without surprise, for having occasionally employed Gevrol, he did not expect from him such ingenuity and sagacity as was displayed in this report.

"Is it you, then, who have conducted this investigation so ably?" he demanded.

"Upon my word, no!" responded Inspector Gevrol. I, myself, am not so clever as all that. I content myself with telling only what I discover; and I say; "Here it is!" May I be hung if the grounds of this report exist, except in the brain of the man who has made it."

Perhaps he really believed his assertion, being one of those persons who are blinded by vanity to such a degree that, with the most convincing evidence before their eyes, they deny it.

"Yet," insisted the judge, "these women whose foot-prints were left here have existed. The accomplice who left the bits of wool upon the plank is a real being. This ear-ring is a positive, palpable proof."

Gevrol had hard work to refrain from shrugging his shoulders.

"All this can be satisfactorily explained without a search of twelve or fourteen hours. That the murderer had an accomplice, is possible. The presence of the women is very natural. Wherever there are men thieves, you will find women thieves. As for the diamond—what does that prove? That the scoundrels had just met with a streak of good luck, that they had come here to divide their booty, and that the quarrel arose from the division."

This was an explanation, and such a plausible one, that M. d'Escorval was silent, reflecting before he announced his decision.

"Decidedly," he declared at last, "decidedly, I adopt the hypothesis set forth in the report. Who is the author of it?"

Anger made Gevrol's face as red as a lobster.

"The author is one of my men," he replied; "a very clever and adroit man—Monsieur Lecoq. Come forward, Lecoq, that the judge may see you."

The young man advanced, his lips tightly compressed to conceal a smile of satisfaction.

"My report is only a summary, monsieur," he began; "but I have certain ideas——"

"Which you will tell me when I ask for them," interrupted the judge.

And oblivious of Lecoq's chagrin, he took from the portfolio of his clerk two forms, which he filled up and handed to Gevrol, saying:

"Here are two orders; take them to the station-house, where the accused and the mistress of this cabin are confined, and have them conducted to the prefecture, where they will be privately examined."

When he had given these directions, M. d'Escorval was turning towards the physicians, when Lecoq, at the risk of a second rebuff, interposed.

"May I venture," he asked, "to beg monsieur to confide this mission to me?"

"Impossible; I may have need of you here."

"I desired, monsieur, to collect certain evidence, and an opportunity to do so may not present itself again."

The judge, perhaps, fathomed the young man's motive.

"So be it," he replied; "but after your task is completed you will await me at the prefecture, where I shall go as soon as I have finished here. Go."

Lecoq did not wait for him to repeat the order. He snatched up the papers, and hastened away.

He did not run; he flew over the ground. He no longer experienced any fatigue from the labors of the preceding night. Never had he felt so strong and alert in body, so strong and clear in mind.

He was hopeful of success. He had confidence in himself, and he would have been perfectly happy if he could have had another judge to deal with. But M. d'Escorval overawed and froze him to such a degree that his mind seemed absolutely paralyzed in his presence. With what a disdainful glance he had surveyed him! With what an imperious tone he had imposed silence upon him—and that, too, when he had found his work deserving of commendation.

"But nonsense!" he mentally exclaimed, "does one ever taste perfect happiness here below?"

And he hurried on.

CHAPTER XI.

When, after a rapid walk of twenty minutes, Lecoq reached the police station of the Barriere d'Italie, the keeper, with his pipe in his mouth, was pacing slowly to and fro before the guard-house,

By his thoughtful air, and by the anxious glance that he cast now and then upon the little grated window, any

passer-by might have known that the keeper had at that moment a very rare bird in his cage.

As soon as he recognized Lecoq, his brow cleared, and he paused in his promenade.

"Ah, well!" he inquired, "what news?"

"I bring an order to conduct the prisoners to the prefecture."

The keeper rubbed his hands, evidently relieved.

"Very well! very well!" he exclaimed. "The black Maria will pass here in less than an hour; we will throw them in, and hurry the coachman off——"

Lecoq was obliged to interrupt his transports of satisfaction.

"Are the prisoners alone?" he inquired.

"Entirely alone; the woman on her side of the hall, the man on the other. This has been a remarkably quiet night, a Shrove Sunday night, too! It is surprising. It is true that your hunt was interrupted."

"You have had a drunken man here, however."

"No—yes—that is a fact—this morning, just at daybreak. A poor devil, who is under a great obligation to Gevrol."

The involuntary irony of this remark must have awakened Lecoq's regrets.

"Under a great obligation, indeed!" said he, approvingly, and with a laugh.

"Although you seem inclined to laugh, such is really the case; had it not been for Gevrol the man would certainly have been run over."

"And what has become of him?"

The keeper shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah!" he responded. "You ask me too much. He was a very worthy man, who had been spending the night at the house of one of his friends, and on coming out into the air, the wine flew to his head. He told us all about it when he became sober, which was in the course of half an hour. I have never seen a man so vexed. He wept, and said again and again: "The father of a family, and at my age! Oh! it is shameful! What shall I say to my wife? What will the children think?"

"Did he talk much about his wife?"

"He talked about nothing else. He even mentioned her name—Eudosia, Leocadie, or some name of that sort. He thought, poor man, that he was ruined, and that we would keep him here. He asked us to send for the commissioner, to go to his house? When we set him free, I thought he would go mad with joy; he kissed our hands, and he paid his score. Ah! he did not even stop to ask for his change!"

"And did you place him in the cage with the murderer?" inquired Lecoq.

"Certainly."

"They have talked with each other then."

"Talked! The man was so drunk, I tell you, that he could not have said 'bread.' When he was deposited in the cell, pouf! he fell like a log. As soon as he recovered we let him out. No, they did not talk to each other."

The young policeman had become very thoughtful.

"It was, indeed, so!" he murmured.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

Lecoq was not inclined to communicate his reflections to the keeper of the guard-house. They were by no means agreeable.

"I was right," he thought; "this pretended drunken man was none other than the accomplice, and he has as much adroitness as he has audacity and coolness. While we were following his footprints he was watching us. We went away and he was bold enough to enter the hovel. Then he came here and compelled them to arrest him; and thanks to an assumption of childish simplicity, he succeeded in finding an opportunity to speak to the murderer. How perfectly he has played his *role*. But I know that he played a part, and that is something. I know that it will be necessary to believe exactly the opposite of what he said. He talked of his family, of his wife, of his children—hence he has neither children, wife, nor family."

He checked himself suddenly; he had forgotten, this was not the time to become absorbed in conjectures.

"What kind of a looking man was this drunkard?" he inquired.

"He was tall and very large, had a ruddy complexion, white whiskers, a full face, small eyes, a broad flat nose, and a good-natured, jovial manner."

"How old would you suppose him to be?"

"From forty to fifty years of age."

"Did you form any idea of his profession?"

"*Ma foi!* the man with his soft cap and his heavy brown overcoat must be the keeper of some little shop, or a clerk."

Having obtained this sufficiently exact description, which accorded perfectly with the result of his investigations, Lecoq was about to enter the station-house when a sudden thought brought him instantly to a stand-still.

"I hope, at least, that this man has had no communication with the Widow Chupin!"

The keeper laughed heartily,

"How could he have had any?" he responded. "Is not the old woman alone in her cell? Ah, the old wretch! There has not been a moment that she was not cursing and threatening us. No, never

in my whole life have I heard such language as she has used! It was enough to make the very stones blush; even the drunken man was so shocked that he went to speak to her through the opening in the door, and to tell her to be quiet."

The young man's gesture was so expressive of impatience and wrath that the keeper paused, much perturbed.

"What is the matter?" he stammered. "Why are you angry?"

"Because," replied Lecoq, furiously, "because——"

And not wishing to disclose the real cause of his anger, he entered the station-house, saying that he wished to see the prisoner.

Left alone the keeper began to swear in his turn.

"These agents of police are all alike," he grumbled. "They question you, you tell them all they desire to know; and afterwards, if you venture to ask them anything, they reply: 'nothing,' or 'because.' They have too much authority; it makes them proud."

Looking through the judas, a little latticed window in the door, through which the men on guard watch the prisoners, Lecoq eagerly examined the appearance of the murderer.

He was obliged to ask himself if this was really the same man whom he had seen some hours previous at the Poivriere, standing upon the threshold, holding the squad in check by the intense fury of his hate, by his proud forehead, his sparkling eyes, and his trembling lip.

Now his whole person betrayed a pitiable weakness, utter despondency, gloom and despair.

He was seated on a bench opposite the judas, with his elbows on his knees, and his chin resting upon his hand, his eyes fixed upon vacancy, his lower lip hanging.

"No," murmured Lecoq, "no, this man is not what he seems to be."

He had looked at him; he now wished to speak to him. He entered; the man raised his head, threw an expressionless glance upon him, but did not say a word.

"Well," demanded the young officer, "how goes it?"

"I am innocent!" responded the man, in a hoarse, discordant voice.

"I hope so, I am sure—but that is for the judge to decide. I came to see if you did not need something."

"No."

A second later the murderer changed his mind.

"If it is all the same to you, I would like a crust and a drink of wine."

"They shall bring it to you," replied Lecoq.

He went out immediately to forage in the neighborhood for eatables of some sort. He was impressed with the idea that in demanding a drink after a refusal, the man had thought only of carrying out his resemblance to the kind of man he pretended to be.

Whoever he might be, the murderer ate with an excellent appetite. He then took up the large glass of wine, drained it slowly, and said:

"It is good! There can be nothing to beat that!"

This satisfaction disappointed Lecoq. He had selected, as a test, one of those horribly thick, bluish, nauseous mixtures which are in vogue around the *barriere*, and he expected some sign of dislike from the murderer.

And there was none whatever. But he had not time to seek the conclusions to be drawn from this fact. The sound of wheels announced the arrival of that lugubrious vehicle, the Black Maria.

It was necessary to place the Widow Chupin in the vehicle by main force. She fought and scratched and cried "Murder!" with all her strength. Then the assassin was requested to take his place in the carriage.

Now, at least, the young policeman counted upon some manifestation of repugnance, and he watched the prisoner closely. None! The man entered the frightful vehicle in the most unconcerned manner, and took possession of his compartment like an old habitue, who knows the most comfortable position to assume in such close quarters.

"Ah! this is an unfortunate morning," murmured Lecoq, much disappointed; "but I will lie in wait for him at the prefecture."

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN the door of the prison-van had been securely closed, the driver cracked his whip, and the strong horses started off on a brisk trot.

Lecoq had taken his seat in front, between the driver and the guard; but his mind was so engrossed with his own thoughts that he heard nothing of their conversation, which was very jovial, although it was frequently disturbed by the shrill voice of the Widow Chupin, who sang and yelled her imprecations alternately.

Lecoq was trying his best to discover a method by which he could surprise some clue to the secret which this murderer hid so cleverly, for he was still convinced that the prisoner must belong to the higher ranks of society.

That this pretender had succeeded in feigning an appetite, that he had concealed his distaste for a nauseous beverage, that he had entered the black Maria without hesitation, was nothing extraor-

dinary after all, in a man who was endowed with much strength of will, when he realized the imminence of his peril, and when his powers of endurance were increased tenfold by the hope of salvation.

But would he be able to hide his feelings as well when he was obliged to submit to the humiliating formalities that awaited him—formalities which, in certain cases can, and must be, pushed even to the verge of insult and outrage?

No; Lecoq could not believe that this would be possible.

He was very sure that the horror that would be inspired in the prisoner's mind by the disgrace, and by the violation of all delicacy of feeling, would cause the man to revolt, to lose his self-control, and draw from him some word that would give the desired clue.

It was not until the gloomy vehicle had left the Pout-Neuf to take the Quai de l'Horloge, that the young detective became conscious of what was passing around him. Soon the van turned into a gate-way, and stopped in a small, damp courtyard.

Lecoq was instantly on the ground. He opened the door of the compartment in which the murderer was confined, and said:

"We are here; descend."

There was no danger that the prisoner would escape. The iron gate had been closed, and at least a dozen policemen and agents were standing near, anxious to see the harvest of the previous night.

When the door was opened, the murderer slowly stepped down from the vehicle.

His expression did not change in the least. His face evinced the perfect indifference of a man accustomed to such ordeals.

An anatomist studying the movement of a muscle could not have watched with a closer attention than Lecoq bestowed upon the attitude, the face, and the aspect of the prisoner.

When the prisoner's foot touched the pavement of the court-yard, he seemed to experience a sensation of satisfaction; he drew a long breath, then he stretched himself, and shook himself violently, as if to regain the elasticity of his limbs, cramped by confinement in the narrow compartment from which he had just emerged.

Then he glanced about him, and a scarcely perceptible smile played upon his lips.

One would have sworn that the place was familiar to him, that he had seen before these high grim walls, these grated windows, these heavy doors—in short, all the sinister belongings of a prison.

"*Mon Dieu!*" thought Lecoq, greatly chagrined, "does he indeed recognize the place?"

The young man's disquietude increased when he saw the prisoner, without waiting for a word, for a motion, for a sign, turn towards one of the five or six doors that opened upon the court-yard.

He walked straight to the one he was expected to enter—straight, without an instant's hesitation. Was it chance?

His amazement and disappointment increased tenfold when he saw the man, after entering the gloomy corridor, walk on some little distance, turn to the left, pass the room of the keeper, and enter the register's office.

An old offender could not have done better.

Lecoq found a cold sweat break out upon his whole body.

"This man," thought he, "has certainly been here before; he knows the ropes."

The register's office was a large room, badly lighted by small windows, whose panes were covered with a thick coating of dust, and heated almost to suffocation by an immense stove.

There sat the clerk reading a paper that was laid over the register—the gloomy register in which are inscribed the names of all those whom misconduct, crime, misfortune, madness, or error have brought to these grim portals.

Three or four watchmen who were awaiting the hour for entering upon their duties, were half asleep upon the wooden benches that lined three sides of the room.

These benches, two tables, and some broken chairs, constituted the furniture of the office.

In one corner stood a measuring machine, under which each culprit was obliged to pass. For their exact height was recorded in order that the description might be complete in every respect.

At the entrance of the culprit accompanied by Lecoq, the clerk raised his head.

"Ah!" said he, "has the van come?"

"Yes," responded Lecoq.

And extending the orders signed by M. d'Escorval, he added:

"Here are the papers for this man."

The register took the documents and read them.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, a triple assassination! oh! oh!"

Positively he regarded the prisoner with great consideration. This was not a common culprit, an ordinary vagabond, a vulgar thief.

"The judge orders a private examination," he continued, "and I must get him other clothing. The clothing he is wearing now will be used as evidence. Let some one go at once and tell the superintendent that the other occupants of the carriage must wait. I will meas-

ure this man's height in compliance with the rules."

The director was not far off, and he soon made his appearance. The clerk had prepared his register.

"Your name?" he demanded first.

"May."

"Your first name?"

"I have none."

"What, you have no Christian name?"

The murderer seemed to reflect for a moment, then he said, sulkily:

"I may as well tell you that you need not wear yourself out questioning me. I shall reply only to the judge. You would like to make me cut my own throat, wouldn't you? It is a very clever trick, but I understand it."

"You must see that you only aggravate your situation," observed the director.

"Not in the least. I am innocent; you wish to ruin me. I only defend myself. Get anything more out of me now, if you can. But you had better give me back the money that they took from me at the station-house. One hundred and thirty-six francs, eight sous! I shall need them when I get out of this place. I wish you to make a note of them on the register. Where are they?"

The money had been given to Lecoq by the keeper of the station-house, who had found it upon the prisoner when he was placed in his custody. Lecoq deposited it upon the table.

"Here are your hundred and thirty-six francs and eight sous," said he, "and also your knife, your handkerchief, and four cigars."

An expression of lively contentment was discernible on the prisoner's features.

"Now," resumed the clerk, "will you answer?"

But the director understood the uselessness of further insistence; he silenced the clerk by a gesture, and addressing the prisoner, he said:

"Take off your shoes."

On receiving this order, Lecoq thought the assassin's glance wavered. Was it only a fancy?

"Why must I do that?" he demanded.

"To pass under the beam," responded the clerk. "We must make a note of your exact height."

The prisoner made no reply, he sat down and drew off his heavy leather boots. The heel of the right one was run over on the inside. He wore no stockings.

"You do not wear shoes except on Sunday, then?" inquired Lecoq.

"Why do you think that?"

"By the mud with which your feet are covered, as high as the ankle-bone."

"And what of that?" exclaimed the man, in an insolent tone. "Is it a crime not to have the feet of a marquise?"

"It is a crime of which you are not guilty, at all events," said the young detective, slowly. "Do you think that I cannot see, in spite of the mud, that your feet are white and neat? The nails have been carefully cut and polished——"

He paused. A lightning flash of his genius for investigation traversed his brain.

He pushed forward a chair, laid a paper upon it, and said:

"Will you place your foot there?"

The man did not comply with the request.

"Ah! do not resist," insisted the director; "we are in force."

The prisoner made no further resistance. He placed his foot upon the chair, as he had been ordered to do, and Lecoq, with the aid of a knife, proceeded to remove the fragments of mud that adhered to the skin.

Anywhere else, they would have laughed at such an act, so mysterious, strange and grotesque, all at the same time. But in this ante-chamber of the court of assizes, the most trivial acts are tinged with a shade of gloom; a laugh is easily frozen upon the lips, and one is astonished by nothing.

All the spectators, from the director down to the guards, had witnessed many other incidents equally absurd; and it did not enter the mind of any one present to inquire the detective's motive.

This much they knew already: that the prisoner was intending to conceal his identity, that it was necessary to establish it, at any cost, and that Lecoq had probably invented some method of attaining this end.

Besides, the operation was soon concluded; and Lecoq brushed the dust from the paper into the palm of his hand.

This dust he divided into two parts. One portion he inclosed in a scrap of paper, and then slipped it into his own pocket; the other package he handed to the director, saying, as he did so:

"I must beg you, monsieur, to receive this on deposit, and to seal it up here, in the presence of the prisoner. This is necessary, that he may not claim by and by that in place of this dust other has been substituted."

The superintendent complied with the request, and as he placed this "bit of proof" (as he styled it) in a small satchel for safe keeping, the murderer shrugged his shoulders with a sneering laugh.

It is true that beneath this cynical gayety Lecoq thought he could detect poignant anxiety.

Chance owed him the compensation of this slight triumph; for previous events had deceived all his calculations.

The prisoner did not offer the slightest

objection when he was ordered to undress, and to exchange his soiled and blood-stained garments for the clothing furnished by the government.

Not a muscle of his face betrayed the secret of his soul, while he submitted his person to one of those ignominious examinations which make the blood mount to the forehead of the lowest criminal.

It was with perfect indifference that he allowed the inspector to comb his hair and his beard, and to examine the interior of his mouth, in order to make sure that he had not concealed in one of these hiding-places a fragment of glass, by the aid of which captives can sever the strongest bars; or one of those microscopic bits of lead that prisoners use in writing the notes which they exchange, rolled up in a morsel of bread, and which they call "postilions."

These formalities having been concluded, the superintendent rang for one of the guard.

"Conduct this man to No. 3 of the secret cells," he ordered.

There was no need to drag the prisoner away. He went out, as he had entered, preceding the guard, like an old *habitue*, who knows where he is going.

"What a rascal!" exclaimed the clerk.

"Then you think——" began Lecoq, baffled but not convinced.

"Ah! there can be no doubt of it," declared the director. "This man is certainly a dangerous malefactor—an old offender—I think I have seen him before—I could almost swear to it."

So these people, who had such a large and varied experience, shared Gevrol's opinion; Lecoq stood alone.

He did not discuss the matter—what good would it have done? Besides, they were just bringing in the Widow Chupin.

The journey must have calmed her nerves, for she had become as gentle as a lamb. It was in a wheedling voice, and with tearful eyes, that she called upon these "good gentlemen" to witness the shameful injustice with which she was treated—she, an honest woman. She was the support of the family (since her son Polyte was in custody, charged with pocket-picking), and what would become of her daughter-in-law, and her grandson Toto, who had no one to look to but her?

But when they were leading her away, after she had given her full name, she no sooner entered the corridor than nature reasserted itself, and they heard her quarreling with the guard.

"You are wrong not to be polite," she was saying to him; "you are losing a good fee, without counting many a good drink that I would give you without charge, when I get out of here."

"The examinations were over, and Lecoq was free until the arrival of M. d'Escorval. He wandered through the corridors, and from room to room; but, as he was questioned on every side, he went out and sat down upon the quay to collect his thoughts.

His convictions were unchanged. He was still more convinced that the prisoner was concealing his real social condition; but, on the other hand, it was evident that the man was well acquainted with the prison and with its usages.

He had also proved himself to be much more clever—a thousand times more clever—than Lecoq had supposed.

What self-control! What powers of dissimulation! He had not so much as frowned while undergoing the severest ordeals, and he had deceived the most experienced eyes in Paris.

The young detective had been waiting there nearly three hours, as motionless as the post upon which he was seated, and alike insensible to the cold and to the flight of time, when a *coupe* drew up before the entrance of the prison, and M. d'Escorval descended, followed by his clerk.

Lecoq rose and hastened towards them, breathless with anxiety.

"My researches on the spot," said the judge, "confirm me in my belief that you are right. Is there anything new?"

"Yes, monsieur; a fact apparently very trivial, but of an importance that———"

"Very well!" interrupted the judge. "You will explain this to me by and by. I wish first to make a summary examination of the accused parties. A mere matter of form to-day. Wait for me here."

Although the judge promised to make haste, Lecoq expected that at least an hour would elapse before he reappeared. But he was wrong. Twenty minutes had not passed before M. d'Escorval emerged from the prison without his clerk.

He walked very quickly, and calling to the young detective from some little distance, he said:

"I must return home at once—instantly; I cannot listen to you."

"But, monsieur———"

"Enough! the bodies of the victims have been taken to the morgue. Keep a sharp look-out there. Then, this evening make———Well—do whatever you think best."

"But, monsieur, I must———"

"To-morrow!—to-morrow at 9 o'clock, in my office in the Palais de Justice."

Lecoq wished to insist upon a hearing, but M. d'Escorval had entered, or rather had thrown himself, into his coupe, and the coachman was cracking his whip.

"And he is a judge!" murmured the young man, left panting upon the quay. "Has he gone mad?"

And an uncharitable thought entered his mind.

"Can it be," he murmured, "that he

holds the key to the mystery? Does he not desire to get rid of me."

This suspicion was so terrible that he hastened back to the prison, hoping to gain some light from the bearing of the prisoner, and ran to peer through the little aperture in the heavy door leading into the cell.

The murderer was lying upon the pallet that stood directly opposite the door. His face was turned towards the wall, and he was enveloped to the very eyes in the coverlid.

Was he asleep? No; for Lecoq detected a strange movement of the body. This movement, which he could not explain, annoyed him. He applied his ear instead of his eye to the aperture, and he distinguished a stifled moan. There could no longer be any doubt. The death rattle was sounding in the prisoner's throat.

"Here! here!" cried Lecoq, greatly excited. "Help! help!"

Ten guards came running at his call.

"The prisoner! He is killing himself!"

They opened the door; it was time.

The poor wretch had torn a binding from his clothing, had tied it around his neck, and using in place of a tourniquet a tin spoon that had been brought in with his allowance of food, he was strangling himself.

The prison doctor, who had been sent for, and who immediately bled the prisoner, declared that in ten minutes all would have been over.

When the murderer regained consciousness, he gazed about his cell with a wild, idiotic stare. One might have supposed that he was amazed to find himself still alive. Then a great tear welled from his swollen eyelids, and rolled down his cheek.

They pressed him with questions—not a word in response.

"Since he is in such a frame of mind, and since we cannot give him a companion, as he has been sentenced to solitary confinement, we must put him in a straight jacket."

After he had assisted in binding the prisoner, Lecoq went away, very thoughtful, and painfully agitated. He felt that this veil of mystery hid some terrible drama.

"But what has occurred?" he murmured. "Has this unfortunate man, who tried to destroy himself, confessed all to the judge? Why should he have committed such an act of desperation?"

CHAPTER XIII.

LECOQ did not sleep any that night.

And yet he had been on his feet for more than forty hours, and had scarcely paused to eat or to drink.

But anxiety, hope, and even fatigue itself, imparted to his body the factitious strength of fever, and to his intellect that unhealthy acuteness which is the result of intense mental effort.

He no longer occupied himself in pursuing imaginary deductions, as he had done when in the employ of his patron, the astronomer. Facts were more startling than chimeras. They were only too real—the dead bodies of the three victims that were lying on the marble slab of the morgue.

But if the catastrophe itself was certain, beyond the shadow of a doubt, everything connected with it could only be conjectured. Not a witness could be found to tell what circumstances had preceded and paved the way for this terrible *denouement*.

One discovery, it is true, would suffice to dissipate these doubts, and that was the identity of the murderer.

Who was he? Which was right?—Gevrol, upheld by all the men at the prison, or Lecoq, who stood alone?

Gevrol's opinion was based upon formidable proof, the evidence that enters the mind through the sense of sight.

Lecoq's hypothesis was based only upon a series of subtle observations, and of deductions whose starting point, was a single sentence, which had fallen from the lips of the murderer.

And yet Lecoq did not feel the least particle of uncertainty after his short conversation with M. d'Escorval's clerk, whom he met as he was leaving the prison.

This worthy young man, when adroitly interrogated by Lecoq, was easily persuaded to reveal what had passed between the prisoner and the judge.

It was, one might say, nothing at all.

The murderer, so the clerk declared, had not only refused to make any confession to M. d'Escorval, but he had replied in the most evasive manner to all the questions which had been put to him; and in several instances he had not replied at all.

And if the judge had not insisted upon a reply, it was only because this first examination was a mere formality, intended to justify the rather premature delivery of the order to imprison the accused,

Under these circumstances, how was one to explain this act of despair on the part of the prisoner?

The statistics of prisons prove that "habitual offenders" (that is the expression) do not commit suicide.

When detected in a criminal act, some members of this class are seized with a wild frenzy, and have what are styled nervous attacks; others fall into a dull stupor, like a glutted beast who falls asleep with the blood of his victim upon his lips.

But such men never think of putting an end to their days. They hold fast to their life, no matter how seriously they may be compromised. They are cowards.

On the other hand, the unfortunate man who, in a moment of frenzy, commits some crime, not unfrequently seeks to avoid the consequences of his act by a voluntary death.

Hence this abortive attempt on the part of the accused was a strong argument in favor of Lecoq's theory.

This wretched man's secret must be a terrible one, since he holds it dearer than his life, since he has tried to destroy himself that he might take it inviolate to the grave.

Four o'clock sounded.

Quickly Lecoq sprang from the bed, where he had thrown himself down without removing his clothing; and five minutes later he was walking down the Rue Montmartre.

The weather was still disagreeable; the fog had not lifted. But what did it matter to the young detective?

He was walking briskly on, when, just as he reached Saint Eustache, some one in a coarse, mocking voice accosted him with:

"Ah, ha! my fine fellow!"

He looked up and perceived Gevrol, who, accompanied by three of his men, had come to cast his nets near the market. It is a good place. The police seldom fail to find thieves and vagabonds lurking around the establishment kept open during the night by the hucksters.

"You are up very early this morning, Monsieur Lecoq," continued the inspector; "you are still trying to discover our man's identity, I suppose?"

"Still trying."

"Is he a prince in disguise, or only a simple marquis?"

"One or the other, I am quite certain."

Very well. In that case you will not refuse to give us an opportunity to drink to your success."

Lecoq consented, and the party entered a saloon near by. When the glasses were filled:

"Upon my word, General," exclaimed Lecoq, "our meeting will save me a long walk. I was intending to go to the prefecture to request you, in behalf of M. d'Escorval, to send one of our comrades to the morgue this morning. The affair at the Poivriere has been noised about, and all the world will be there, and he desires some officer to be present to watch the crowd and listen to the remarks of the visitors."

"Very well; Father Absinthe shall be there at the opening."

To send Father Absinthe where a shrewd and subtle agent was required was a mockery. Still Lecoq made no protest against this decision. It was better to be badly served than to be betrayed; and he could trust Father Absinthe.

"It does not matter much," continued Gevrol; "but you should have informed me of this last evening. But when I reached the prefecture you had gone."

"I had business."

"Yes?"

"At the station-house at the Barriere D'Italie. I wished to know whether the floor of the cage was paved or tiled."

After this response, he paid the score, saluted his superior officer, and went out.

"Thunder!" exclaimed Gevrol, striking his glass violently, upon the counter. "Thunder! how that fellow provokes me! He does not know the A B C's of his profession. When he can discover nothing, he invents wonderful stories, and then misleads the judges with his high-sounding phrases, in the hope of winning promotion. I will give him advancement with a vengeance! I will teach him to set himself above me!"

Lecoq had not been deceived. The evening before, he had visited the station-house where the prisoner had first been confined, and had compared the soil of the cell floor with the dust he had in his pocket; and he took away with him, as he believed, one of those crushing proofs that often suffice to extort from the most obstinate criminal a complete confession.

If he was in haste to part company with Gevrol, it was because he was eager to pursue his investigations still further, before appearing in the presence of M. d'Escorval.

He was determined to find the coachman who had been stopped by the two women on the Rue du Chevaleret; and with this object in view, he had obtained at the prefecture the name and address of each person who had carriages for hire, between the road to Fontainebleau and the Seine.

His first efforts at investigation were unfortunate.

In the first establishment which he visited, the stable boys, who were not yet up, swore at him roundly. In the second, he found the grooms at work, but not a coachman had made his appearance.

Moreover, the proprietor of the establishment refused to show him the books upon which are recorded—or should be recorded—the daily engagements of each coachman.

He was beginning to despair, when at about half-past seven o'clock he reached the house of a man named Trigault, whose establishment was just beyond the fortifications. Here he learned that on Sunday night, or rather early Monday morning, one of the coachmen, as he was returning home for the night, had been

accosted by some parties, who succeeded in persuading him to go back to Paris.

This coachman was pointed out to Lecoq; he was then in the court-yard harnessing his horse.

He was a little old man, with a very high color, and small eyes full of cunning. Lecoq walked up to him at once.

"Was it you," he demanded, "who, on Sunday night, or rather on Monday, between one and two o'clock in the morning, took two women from the Rue du Chevaleret to the city?"

The coachman looked up, and surveying Lecoq attentively, cautiously replied:

"Perhaps."

"It is a positive answer that I want."

"Aha!" said the old man, sneeringly, "monsieur undoubtedly knows two ladies who have lost something in a carriage, and so———"

The young detective trembled with joy. This man was certainly the one whom he sought; he interrupted him:

"Have you heard anything about a crime that has been committed in the neighborhood?"

"Yes; a murder in a low drinking saloon."

"Very well! These two women were there; they fled when we entered the saloon. I am trying to find them. I am an agent of the safety-service; here is my card. Can you give me any information?"

The coachman had become very pale.

"Ah! the wretches!" he exclaimed. "I am no longer surprised at the *pour-boire* they gave me. A louis, and two one-hundred sou pieces for the fare—thirty francs in all. Cursed money! if I had not spent it, I would throw it away!"

"And where did you carry them!"

"To the Rue de Bourgogne. I have forgotten the number, but I should recognize the house."

"Unfortunately they would not have you leave them at their own door."

"Who knows? I saw them ring; they pulled the bell, and I think they entered just as I drove away. Shall I take you there?"

Lecoq's sole response was to spring upon the driver's seat, exclaiming:

"Let us be off."

CHAPTER XIV.

Was one to suppose that the women who escaped from the Widow Chupin's saloon at the moment of the murder were utterly devoid of intelligence?

No!

Was it possible that these two fugitives, conscious as they were of their perilous situation, would have gone to their real home in a carriage hired on the public highway?

No, again.

Then the hope of finding them manifested by the coachman was chimerical.

Lecoq felt this, and yet he had not hesitated an instant before leaping upon the seat, and giving the signal to depart.

By doing this, he obeyed a maxim which he had fabricated in his hours of meditation, a maxim which was to assure his fame in after days, and which reads as follows:

"In the matter of information, above all, regard with suspicion that which seems probable. Begin always by believing what seems incredible."

While arriving at these conclusions, the young detective was ingratiating himself into the good graces of the coachman, thereby winning all the information that this worthy had it in his power to bestow.

It was also a way that Lecoq had devised to get back to the heart of Paris more quickly.

He was not deceived in this last calculation.

The horse pricked up his ears and quickened his pace when his master cried: "Hi, there, Cocotle!" in tones that the poor beast knew would admit of no trifling.

In less than no time the carriage reached the Route de Choisy, and then Lecoq resumed his inquiries.

"Well, my good man," he began, "you have told me the principal facts, now I would like the details. How did these two women attract your attention?"

"It was all very simple. I had been having a most unfortunate day—six hours standing in line upon the boulevards, the rain pouring down all the time. What misery! At midnight I had gained only thirty sous of *pour-boire*, all told. Still I was so chilled through, and my horse was so tired, that I decided to return. I was grumbling not a little, as you may suppose! After passing the corner of the Rue Picard, on the Rue du Chevaleret, I saw two women standing under a street lamp, some distance from me. Naturally, I did not pay any attention to them; for when a man is as old as I am, women ———"

"Go on!" said Lecoq, who could not restrain his impatience.

"I had passed them, when they began to call: 'Coachman! coachman?' I pretended I did not hear them; but one of them ran after me, crying: 'A louis! a louis for *pour-boire!*' I deliberated for a moment, when, as if to conquer my hesitancy, the woman added: 'And ten francs for fare!' Of course, I stopped at once."

Lecoq was boiling over with impatience; but he felt that direct and hurried questions would be useless. The wisest

course was to listen to all the man had to say.

"As you may suppose," continued the coachman, "one is not inclined to trust two such suspicious characters, alone at that hour, in that part of the city. So when they were about to enter the carriage, I cried: 'Halt there! my little friends, you have promised papa some sous; where are they?' The one who had called me at once handed me thirty francs, saying: 'Above all, make haste!'"

"It would be impossible to be more exact," said the young man, approvingly. "Now, how about these two women?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what kind of people did they seem to be; for what would you have taken them?"

The man's red face expanded under the influence of a broad smile.

"Well!—I took them to be nothing very good," he replied.

"Ah! and how were they dressed?"

"Like other girls who go to dance at the Rainbow, you know. But one of them was very neat and trig, while the other—well! she was a terrible dowdy."

"Which one ran after you?"

"The neatly dressed girl, the one who ——"

He paused suddenly; so vivid was the remembrance that passed through his brain, that he jerked the reins and brought his horse to a stand-still.

"Thunder!" he exclaimed, "now I think of it, I did notice something strange, One of the two women called the other madame, as large as life, while the other said thee and thou, and spoke rather harshly to her companion."

"Oh! oh! oh!" exclaimed the young detective, in three different keys. "And which, if you please, said thou?"

"The shabbily dressed one. She couldn't put two feet in one shoe, that woman couldn't. She shook the other, the trig-looking girl, as if she were a plum tree. 'Wretch!' said she, 'do you wish to ruin us. You can faint when we get home if you wish; come along!' And the other replied, sobbing: 'Indeed, madame, indeed, I cannot!' She really did seem unable to move; in fact, she seemed so ill that I said to myself: 'Here is a young woman who has drank more than a sufficiency!'"

These facts confirmed while they corrected Lecoq's first supposition.

As he had suspected, the social position of the two women was not the same.

He had been mistaken, however, in attributing the pre-eminence to the woman wearing the small shoes with the high heels, whose impressions upon the snow had revealed her weakness.

This pre-eminence belonged to her who had left the prints of the large, broad shoes; and superior in her rank, she had been so in her energy.

Until now Lecoq had been satisfied that she was the servant and the other the mistress.

"Is this all, my good fellow!" he asked his companion.

"All," replied the coachman, "except I noticed that the shabbily-dressed woman who paid me had a hand—well, as small as an infant's; and in spite of her anger, her voice was as sweet as music."

"Did you see her face?"

"I just caught a glimpse of it."

"Could you tell if she were pretty, or whether she was a blonde or a brunette?"

So many questions at a time confused the worthy coachman.

"Stop a m nute!" he replied. "In my opinion she was not pretty, and I do not believe she was young, but she certainly was a blonde, with plenty of hair."

"Was she tall or short; stout, or slender?"

"Between the two."

This was very vague.

"And the other," demanded Lecoq, "the neatly-dressed one?"

"The devil! As for her, I did not notice her at all; she was very small, that is all I know about her."

"Would you recognize her if you should meet her again?"

"Thunder! no."

The carriage had traversed about half of the Rue de Bourgogne; the coachman stopped his horse and said:

"Attention! That is the house which the two women entered."

To draw off the silk handkerchief that served him as a muffler, to fold it and slip it into his pocket, to spring to the ground and enter the house indicated, was the work of an instant only for the young detective.

In the concierge's little room an old woman was seated knitting.

"Madame," said Lecoq, politely, presenting her with the silk handkerchief, "I came here to return this article to one of your lodgers."

"To which one?"

"Really, that is something I do not know."

The worthy concierge for a moment supposed that this extremely polite young man was mocking her.

"Villainous wretch——!" she began.

"Pardon," interrupted Lecoq; "allow me to finish. This is my explanation: Night before last, or rather day before yesterday morning, about three o'clock, I was quietly returning home, when, not far from here, two ladies who seemed to be in a great hurry passed me. One of them dropped this—I picked it up, and of course hastened after them to return it. But my labor was lost; they had al-

ready entered here. At such an hour I did not like to ring, for fear of disturbing you. Yesterday I was very busy, but to-day I came to return the article; here it is."

He laid the handkerchief upon the table, and pretended that he was about to go, but the concierge detained him.

"Many thanks for your kindness," said she, "but you can keep it. Here, in this house, we have no ladies who return home alone after midnight."

"Still I have eyes," insisted Lecoq, "and I certainly saw———"

"Ah! I had forgotten," exclaimed the old woman. "The night you speak of some one did ring the bell here. I opened my door and listened—I heard nothing. Not hearing any one close the door or come up-stairs, I said to myself: 'It is some mischievous boy playing a trick on me. I slipped on my dress and went out into the vestibule. What did I see? Two shadowy forms running away; as they ran they slammed the outer door in my face. I opened it again as quickly as I could, and looked out into the street. What did I see then? Two women hurrying away as fast as they could."

"In what direction?"

"They were running towards the Rue de Varennes."

Lecoq was baffled again; he bowed civilly to the concierge, whom he might have need of again, and went back to the carriage.

"As I had supposed, they do not live here," he remarked to the coachman.

That worthy man shrugged his shoulders in evident vexation; and his wrath was about to find vent in a torrent of words, when Lecoq, who had consulted his watch, checked it by saying:

"Nine o'clock!—I shall be an hour behind time, but I shall have some news to tell. Take me to the morgue as quickly as possible.

CHAPTER XV.

THE days that follow mysterious crimes and catastrophes, whose victims have not been recognised, are great days at the morgue.

The employes hasten about exchanging jests that make one's flesh creep. Almost all of them are very gay. Perhaps it is from an imperious need to arm themselves against the horrible gloom that surrounds them.

"We shall have the world and his wife here to-day," they say.

And, in fact, as soon as Lecoq and his coachman reached the quay, they could see in the distance the dense and excited crowd which had gathered around that chamber of horrors.

The newspapers had reported the affair that had taken place in the Widow Chupin's saloon, and everybody wished to see the victims.

Upon the bridge Lecoq made the driver stop his horse, and leaped to the ground.

"I do not wish to get out of the carriage before the morgue," he said to the coachman.

Then drawing out, first his watch, and then his purse, he said.

"We have spent one hour and forty minutes, my good fellow, consequently, I owe you———"

"Nothing at all," replied the coachman, decidedly.

"But———"

"No—not a *sou*. I am too much provoked to think that I took the money of those abominable jades! I wish what I bought to drink with their money had given me the colic. So pray feel no uneasiness about the score. If you need a carriage, take mine for nothing, until you have caught the wretches."

Lecoq at that time was by no means rich, and he did not insist.

"You will at least take my name and my address?" continued the coachman.

"Certainly. The judge will wish to hear your deposition. You will receive a summons."

"Very well. Address Papillon (Eugene), coachman, at the house of M. Trigault. I lodge there, because I have some small interest in the business, you see."

The young policeman was hastening away, when Papillon called him back.

"When you leave the morgue you will want to go somewhere—you told me that you had an appointment, and that you were late now."

"Yes, I ought to be at the Palais de Justice; but it is only a few steps from here."

"No matter. I am going to wait for you at the corner. Ah! it is useless to say 'no'; I have made up my mind, and I am a Breton. I have a favor to ask of you. Ride out that thirty francs that those jades paid me."

It would have been cruel to refuse such a request. Lecoq made a motion of assent, and hurried towards the morgue.

If there was a crowd outside, it was because the gloomy place was full, literally packed inside.

Lecoq, to effect an entrance, was obliged to use his elbows vigorously.

Within the sight was horrible; and it was terrible to think what disgusting sensations and emotions that ferocious throng had come to seek there.

There were women in great numbers, and crowds of young maidens.

The shop girls and the workmen who reside in the neighborhood made a *detour*,

in order to come and look upon the harvest of dead bodies which crime, carriage accidents, the Seine, and the canal St. Martin gather each day for the morgue. The most sensitive came no farther than the door, the more intrepid enter and relate their impressions to their less courageous companions on emerging from the horrible place.

When there is no body there; when the marble slabs are unoccupied, the visitors are not pleased—hard as it may be to believe it.

But there was a full house that morning. All the slabs, with the exception of two, were occupied.

The atmosphere was terrible. A damp chill penetrated one's body, and from the panting crowd rose an infectious steam, heavily impregnated with the odor of the chloride of lime used as a disinfectant.

And with the whispers of the bystanders, which were interspersed with sighs and exclamations, was mingled, as a continuous accompaniment, the murmur of the water trickling from the spigot at the head of each slab; a tiny stream that flowed forth only to fall in fine spray upon the marble.

Through the small arched windows a gray light stole in on the exposed bodies, making each muscle stand out clearly, bringing into bold relief the ghastly tints of the lifeless flesh, and imparting a sinister aspect to the tattered clothing suspended about the room to aid in identification. This clothing, after a certain time, is sold—for nothing is wasted.

But Lecoq was too much occupied with his own thoughts to remark the horrors of the scene.

He scarcely bestowed a glance on the three victims. He was seeking Father Absinthe and did not see him anywhere.

Had Gevrol intentionally or unintentionally failed to fulfil his promise, or had Father Absinthe forgotton his duty in his morning dram?

Powerless to decide what the cause of his comrade's absence might be, Lecoq addressed the head keeper:

"It would seem that no one has yet recognized either of the unfortunate victims of the triple murder at the Widow Chupin's."

"No one. And yet, from the opening, we have had an immense crowd If I were master here, on such days as this, I would ask an admission fee of two sous, aud charge half-price for children. It would bring in a round sum—would more than cover the expenses."

The idea thus presented offered an inducement to conversation, but Lecoq did not seize it.

"Excuse me," he interrupted. "Did they not send one of the agents of the secret-service here this morning?"

"Yes, there was one here."

"Has he gone away then? I do not see him anywhere."

The keeper, before making any response, glanced suspiciously at the eager questioner, and at last, with some hesitancy of manner, he inquired:

"Are you one of them?"

This phrase came into circulation at the epoch when so many secret agents, whose business it was to excite revolt, flourished. Under the Restoration, this term was applied only to the police.

"He is one of them," or "he is not one of them." The expression has survived the circumstances that gave it birth.

"I am one of them," replied Lecoq, exhibiting his badge in support of his assertion.

"And your name?"

"Is Lecoq."

The face of the keeper was suddenly illumined by a smile.

"In that case," said he, "I have a letter for you, written by your comrade who was obliged to go away. Here it is."

The detective at once broke the seal and read:

"MONSIEUR LECOQ———"

"Monsieur?" this simple formula of politeness brought a faint smile to the lips of the reader. Was it not, on the part of Father Absinthe, an evident recognition of his colleague's superiority?

The young man saw in it an unquestioning devotion which it would be his duty to repay with the kind protection of the master for his first disciple.

He continued the perusal of his letter.

"MONSIEUR LECOQ—I had been standing on duty since the opening of the morgue, when about nine o'clock three young men entered, arm-in-arm. From their manner and appearance I judged them to be clerks in some store or warehouse. Suddenly I noticed that one of them had turned as white as his shirt; and calling the attention of his companions to one of the unknown victims, he said: 'Gustave!'

"His comrades put their hands over his lips, and one of them said: 'What are you about, you fool, to mix yourself up with this affair! Do you wish to get us into trouble?'

"Thereupon they went out, and I followed them.

"But the person who had spoken, was so overcome that he could scarcely drag himself along; and his companions were obliged to take him to a little restaurant.

"I entered it myself, and it is there where I am writing this letter, while I watch them out of the corner of my eye. The head keeper will give you this note explaining my absence. You will understand that I am going to follow these men. A. B. S."

The handwriting of this letter was al-

most illegible; there were faults of orthography in each line; but its meaning was clear and exact, and could not fail to awaken the most flattering hopes.

Lecoq's face was radiant when he returned to the carriage, and, as he urged on his horse, the old coachman could not refrain from saying:

"Things are going on to suit you."

A friendly "chut!" was the only response. It required all his attention to classify this new information.

When he descended from the carriage before the gate of the Palais de Justice, he experienced considerable difficulty in dismissing the old coachman, who insisted upon remaining at his orders. He succeeded at last, but even when he had reached the portico of the left entrance, the worthy driver, standing upon his carriage-box, shouted:

"At the house of M. Trigault—do not forget—Father Papillon—No. 998—1,000 less 2———"

When he reached the third story of the left wing of the palace, and was about entering that long, narrow and sombre corrider known as the *galerie de l'instruction*, Lecoq addressed a door-keeper installed behind a heavy oaken desk.

"M. d'Escorval is undoubtedly in his office," he remarked.

The man shook his head.

"M. d'Escorval," he replied, "is not here this morning, and he will not be here for several weeks."

"Why so? What do you mean?"

"Last evening as he was alighting from his carriage, at his own door, he had a most unfortunate fall, and broke his leg."

CHAPTER XVI.

ONE is rich—one has a carriage, horses and coachman—and when one passes, leaning back upon the cushions, one receives many an envious glance.

But sometimes the coachman has taken a drop too much, and upsets the carriage; perhaps the horses run away and break everything, or the until then fortunate owner, in a moment of abstraction, misses the step, and fractures his limb upon the sharp curb-stone.

Such accidents are occurring every day; and the long list ought to make humble foot-passengers bless their lowly lot which preserves them from such perils.

On learning the misfortune that had befallen M. d'Escorval, Lecoq's face wore such an expression of consternation that the door-keeper could not help laughing.

"What is there so very extraordinary about it?" he demanded.

"I—oh! nothing———"

The detective did not speak the truth. The fact is, he had just been struck by the strange coincidence of these two events, viz.: the murderer's attempted suicide, and the fall of the judge.

But he did not allow the vague presentiment that flitted through his mind to assume form.

What connection could there be between the two facts?

Besides, he never allowed himself to be governed by prejudice, nor had he as yet enriched his formulary by the axiom which he afterwards professed:

"Regard with distrust all circumstances which seem to favor our secret desires."

It is certain that Lecoq was far from being rejoiced at M. d'Escorval's accident, and that he would gladly have given a great deal if the misfortune could have been prevented. But he could not help saying to himself that he would, by this stroke of misfortune, be freed from all further disagreeable connection with a man whose superciliousness and disdain had, as it were, crushed him.

This thought caused a sensation of relief, almost of light-heartedness.

"In that case," he remarked to the door-keeper, "I shall have nothing to do here this morning."

"You must be joking. Does the world stop moving because one man is disabled? It is only an hour since the news came; but all the urgent business that M. d'Escorval had in charge has already been divided among the other judges."

"I came here about that terrible affair that occured night before last."

"Eh! Why did you not say so? They are waiting for you, and a messenger has been sent to the prefecture for you already. M. Segmuller has charge of the case."

Deep lines of doubt and perplexity appeared on Lecoq's forehead. He tried to remember the judge that bore this name, and wondered whether he should find himself *en rapport* with him.

"Yes," resumed the door-keeper, who seemed to be in a talkative mood, "M. Segmuller—you do not seem to know him. He is a worthy man, not so grim in manner as most of our gentlemen. It was of him that a prisoner said one day, after his examination was over: 'That devil there has pumped me so well that I shall certainly have my head chopped off; but, nevertheless, he is a good fellow!' "

It was with a heart somewhat lightened by these favorable reports, that Lecoq went and tapped at the door that had been indicated, and which bore the number 22.

"Come in!" called a pleasant voice.

Lecoq entered, and found himself face

to face with a man about forty years of age, tall and rather corpulent, who said, at once:

"Ah! you are Agent Lecoq. Very well—take a seat. I am busy just now with the case, but I will attend to you in five minutes."

Lecoq obeyed, and furtively began a study of the man whose co-laborer he was to become.

His exterior corresponded perfectly with the description given by the door-keeper. Frankness and benevolence beamed on his plump face, which was lighted by very pleasant blue eyes.

Still, the young detective fancied that it would not be safe to trust too implicitly to these benign appearances.

And he was quite right.

Born near Strasbourg, M. Segmuller was blessed with that candid physiognomy that belongs to almost all the children of blonde Alsace—a deceitful mask, which not unfrequently conceals Gascon cunning, rendered still more dangerous by a union with extreme caution.

M. Segmuller's mind was wonderfully penetrating and alert; but his system—every judge has his own—was good-humor. While some of his colleagues were as stiff and cutting in manner as the sword which the statute of Justice holds in her hand, he assumed a simplicity and a kindness of demeanor, which never affected his firmness of character as a magistrate, however.

But his voice had such a paternal intonation, he veiled the subtle meaning of his questions and the hearing of the answers with such an affectation of frankness, that the man whom he questioned forgot the necessity of protecting himself, and revealed all. And while the culprit was congratulating himself upon getting the best of the judge, the poor wretch was being turned inside out like a glove.

Beside such a man, a grave and slender clerk would have excited distrust; so he had chosen one who was a caricature of himself. His name was Goquet. He was short, very corpulent, beardless, and smiling. His broad face was expressive of silliness rather than good-humor and he was not particularly bright.

As M. Segmuller had said, he was studying the case which had so unexpectedly fallen into his hands.

All the articles which Lecoq had collected, *from the flakes of wool to the diamond ear-ring*, were spread out upon the magistrate's desk.

He read and re-read the report which had been written by Lecoq, and according to the different phases of the affair, he examined the objects before him, or consulted the plan of the ground.

Not at the end of five minutes, but at the close of a good half hour, he threw himself back in his arm-chair.

"Monsieur Lecoq," he said, slowly, "Monsieur d'Escorval has informed me by a note on the margin of this file of papers, that you are an intelligent man, and that we can trust you."

"My will, at least, is good."

"You speak too slightingly of yourself; this is the first time that an agent has brought me a report as complete as yours. You are young; if you will persevere, I think you will be able to accomplish great things in your profession."

The young man bowed, pale with delight, and stammered his thanks.

"Your opinion in this matter coincides with mine," continued M. Segmuller. "The government attorney informs me that M. d'Escorval shares this opinion. An enigma is before us; and it ought to be solved."

"Oh!—we shall solve it, shall we not, monsieur?" exclaimed Lecoq

He indeed felt capable of extraordinary things; he was ready to go through fire and water for the judge who had received him so kindly. Such intense enthusiasm sparkled in his eyes that M. Segmuller could not restrain a smile.

"I have strong hopes of it myself," he responded; "but we are far from the end. Now, what have you been doing since yesterday? Did M. d'Escorval give you any orders? Have you obtained any new information?"

"I think, monsieur, that I have not wasted any time."

And immediately, with rare precision and with that happiness of expression which seldom fails the man who is thoroughly *en rapport* with his subject, Lecoq related all that he had discovered since his departure from the Poivriere.

He recounted the daring acts committed by the man whom he believed an accomplice, the points he had noted in the murderer's conduct, and the latter's unsuccessful attempt at self-destruction. He repeated the testimony given by the coachman, and by the concierge; he read the letter he had received from Father Absinthe.

In conclusion, he placed upon the judge's desk some of the earth he had procured in such a strange manner, and deposited beside it about the same quantity of dust that he had brought from the floor of the cell in which the murderer had been confined at the Barriere d'Italie.

Then, when he had explained the reasons which had influenced him, and the conclusions that might be drawn from the discovery he had made:

"Ah! you are right!" exclaimed M. Segmuller, "it may be that you have discovered a means to confound all the denials of the prisoner. It certainly is an

evidence of surprising sagacity on your part."

It must have been, for Goquet, the clerk, nodded approvingly.

"Wonderful!" he murmured. "I should never have thought of that."

While he was talking, M Segmuller had carefully placed all the articles of conviction in a large drawer, from which they would not emerge until the trial."

"Now," said he, "I understand the case well enough to examine the Widow Chupin. We may gain some information from her.

He laid his hand upon the bell; Lecoq made an almost supplicating gesture.

"I have one great favor to ask, monsieur,"

"What is it?—speak."

' I should deem it a great favor if you would permit me to be present at this examination. It takes so little, sometimes, to awaken a happy inspiration."

The law says that the accused shall first be privately examined by the judge, assisted by his clerk; but it also allows the presence of agents of the police force.

"Very well," responded M. Segmuller, "remain."

He rang the bell; a messenger appeared.

"Has the Widow Chupin been brought here, in compliance with my orders?"

"Yes, monsieur; she is here in the gallery."

"Let her come in."

An instant after, the woman entered, bowing to the right and to the left.

This was not her first appearance before a magistrate, and she was not ignorant of the respect that is due to justice.

So she had arrayed herself for her examination with the utmost care.

She had arranged her rebellious gray hair in smooth banbeaux, and she had done the best possible with the plain clothing she wore. She had even persuaded the keeper of the prison to purchase for her, with the money she had upon her person at the time of her arrest, a black *crepe* bonnet and two white pocket-handkerchiefs, which she intended to deluge with her tears at pathetic moments.

To second these artifices of the toilette, she had drawn upon her *repertoire* of grimaces for an innocent, sad, and yet resigned air, well fitted, in her opinion, at least, to win the sympathy and indulgence of the magistrate upon whom her fate was to depend.

Thus disguised, with downcast eyes and honeyed voice, she looked so unlike the terrible termagant of the Poivriere, that her customers would scarcely have recognized her.

An honest old bachelor would have been more than likely to offer her twenty francs a month to take charge of his house.

But M. Segmuller had unmasked so many hypocrites that he was not deceived for a moment; and the thought that entered his mind was the same that sparkled in the eyes of Lecoq

"What an old *comedienne!*"

His penetration, it is true, may have been considerably aided by some notes he had just perused. These notes were simply an abstract of the woman's former life, which had been furnished by the chief of police, at the request of the judge.

M Segmuller, by a gesture, warned his smiling clerk to be ready to write.

"Your name?" he demanded, brusquely.

"Aspassie Clapard, my good sir," replied the old woman; "the Widow Chupin, at your service, sir."

She executed a profound courtesy, and added:

"A lawful widow, you understand, sir; I have my marriage papers safe in my chest at home; and if you wish to send any one———"

"Your age?" interrupted the judge.

"Fifty-four "

"Your profession?"

"Dealer in liquors, in Paris, near the Rue du Chateau-des-Rentiers, a few steps from the fortifications."

These questions as to individuality are always the first which are addressed to a prisoner.

They give both the judge and the accused time to study each other, to try each other's strength, as it were, before engaging in a serious struggle; as two adversaries about to engage in mortal combat first try a few passes with foils.

"Now," resumed the judge," we will note your antecedents. Have you not already been found guilty of several offences?"

The old sinner was too well versed in criminal procedure to be ignorant of those famous records, which render the denial of identity such a difficult matter in France.

"I have been unfortunate, my good judge," whined the old woman.

"Yes, a number of times. First, you were arrested on the charge of being a receiver of stolen goods."

"But it was proved that I was innocent, that my character was whiter than snow. My poor, dear husband had been deceived by his comrades; that was all."

"Possibly. But while your husband was submitting to his sentence, you were sentenced to imprisonment, first for one month, and afterwards for a term of three months, for stealing."

"I had enemies who did their best to ruin me."

"Again you were imprisoned for having led some young girls astray."

"They were good-for-nothing hussies, my dear sir, heartless and unprincipled creatures. I did them many favors, and then they went and related a batch of falsehoods to ruin me. I have always been too kind and considerate towards others."

The list of the woman's offences was not exhausted, but M. Segmuller thought it useless to continue.

"Such is your past," he resumed, "At the present time your saloon is the resort of criminals and malefactors. Your son is serving out his fourth term of imprisonment; and it has been clearly proved that you abetted him and assisted him in his evil deeds. Your daughter-in-law, by some miracle, has remained honest and industrious, so you have tormented and abused her to such an extent that the authorities have been obliged to interfere. When she left your house you tried to keep her child—in order to rear it like its father, undoubtedly."

"This," thought the old woman, "is the moment to soften the judge's heart. She drew her new handkerchief from her pocket, and endeavored, by rubbing her eyes energetically, to extract a tear. One might have drawn tears from a piece of parchment just as easily.

"Oh, unhappy me!" she groaned; "to suspect, to think that I would harm my grandson, my poor little Toto! I should be worse than the wild beasts, to wish to draw my own flesh and blood down to perdition."

But these lamentations did not seem to have much effect on the judge. She saw this, and, suddenly changing her mode of attack and her tone, she began her justification.

She did not positively deny her past; but she threw all the blame on destiny, which is not just, which favors some, but not usually the best, people, and which shows no mercy to others.

Alas! she was one of those who have had no chance in life, having always been innocent and persecuted. In this last affair, for example, how was she to blame? A triple murder had stained her saloon with blood; but the most respectable establishments are not exempt from similar catastrophes.

She had had time for reflection in her solitary confinement, she had searched the deepest recesses of her conscience, and she was still unable to discover what blame could justly be laid at her door.

"I can tell you," interrupted the judge. "You are accused of impeding the action of the law.

"*Mon Dieu!* is it possible?"

"And of seeking to defeat justice. This is equivalent to complicity, Widow Chupin; take care. When the police entered your cabin, after this crime had been committed, you refused to answer their questions."

"I told them all that I knew."

"Very well; you must repeat it to me."

M. Segmuller had reason to be content. He had conducted the examination in such a way that the Widow Chupin had been naturally led to undertake the relation of the facts herself.

This was an excellent point gained. Direct questions would, perhaps, have put this shrewd old woman, who retained all her *sang froid*, upon her guard; and it was necessary that she should not suspect what the judge knew, or what he was ignorant of, in relation to the affair.

So, by leaving her to her own devices, he might be able to discover in its entirety the vision which she proposed to substitute for the truth.

This version, neither the judge nor Lecoq doubted, had been concerted at the station-house of the Place d'Italie between the murderer and the pretended drunkard, and afterwards transmitted to the widow by the bold accomplice.

"Oh! the affair was very simple, my good sir," began the honest tavern-keeper. "Sunday evening I was sitting alone by the fire in my establishment, when suddenly the door opened, and I saw three men and two ladies enter."

M. Segmuller and the detective exchanged a rapid glance. The accomplice, than, had seen Lecoq and his companions examining the foot-prints, and did not intend to deny the presence of the two women.

"What time was this?" demanded the judge.

"About eleven o'clock."

"Go on."

"As soon as they sat down, they ordered a bowl of wine, *a la Francaise*. Without boasting, I may say that I have not an equal in preparing this beverage. Of course, I waited upon them, and afterwards, having a blouse to mend for my boy, I went up to my room, which is on the floor above."

"Leaving these people alone?"

"Yes, my judge."

"That showed a great deal of confidence on your part."

The widow sadly shook her head. "When one has nothing," she sighed, "one has no fear of thieves."

"Go on—go on."

"Well, I had been up there about half an hour, when I heard some one below call out: 'Eh! old woman!' I went down, and found a large, heavily-bearded man, who had just come in. He wished a glass of brandy. I waited upon him; he was seated alone at a table."

"And than you went back up-stairs again?" interrupted the judge.

Did the Widow Chupin comprehend the concealed irony? Her physiognomy did not allow you to divine whether such was the case or not.

"Precisely, my good sir," she replied. "Only this time I had scarcely taken up my needle before I heard a terrible uproar in the saloon. I hurried downstairs to put a stop to it—ah well! yes! The three first comers had fallen upon the new comer, and they were beating him, my good sir, they were killing him. I screamed. Just then the man who had come in alone drew a pistol from his pocket; he fired and killed one of his assailants, who fell to the ground. I was so frightened that I crouched on the staircase and put my apron over my head that I might not see the blood run. An instant later Monsieur Gevrol arrived with his men, they forced open the door, and behold———"

These wretched old women, who have trafficked in every sort of vice, and who have tasted every disgrace, sometimes attain a perfection of hypocrisy which deceives the most subtle penetration.

A man who had not been warned beforehand, would certainly have been impressed by the apparent candor of the Widow Chupin, so naturally was it put on, so perfect was the affectation of frankness, surprise, and fear which she displayed.

Unfortunately her eyes were against her—her small grey eyes, which were as restless as those of a caged animal, and which gleamed with cunning.

Meanwhile, she was mentally rejoicing at the success of her narrative, being convinced that the judge placed implicit confidence in her revelation.

In fact, not a single muscle of M. Segmuller's face had betrayed his impressions during the old woman's recital—a recital which, by the way, had been uttered with prestidigitator-like volubility.

When she paused, out of breath, he rose and without a word approached his clerk to look over the notes which Goquet had taken of this first part of the examination.

From the corner where he was quietly seated, Lecoq did not cease his watch over the prisoner.

"She thinks," he was saying to himself, "that it is all over; and that her deposition is accepted without question."

If such were, indeed, the widow's opinion, she was soon to be undeceived.

M. Segmuller, after a few low-spoken words to the smiling Goquet, took a seat near the fire-place, convinced that the moment had come for pushing the examination more strongly.

"So, Widow Chupin," he began, "you affirm that you did not remain for a single moment with the people who came to your saloon for refreshments?"

"Not a moment."

"They entered and gave their order, you waited on them, and you left them at once?"

"Yes, my good sir."

"It seems to me impossible that you should not have caught some words of their conversation. What were they talking about?"

"I am not in the habit of watching and playing the spy over my customers."

"Did you not hear something?"

"Nothing."

The judge shrugged his shoulders with an air of commiseration.

"In other words," he remarked, "you refuse to inform the justice——"

"Oh, my good sir!"

"Allow me to finish. All these improbable stories about leaving the room, and mending your son's clothes in your chamber, you have invented, so that you could say to me: 'I have seen nothing; I have heard nothing; I know nothing.' If such is the system of defence you have adopted, I warn you that it will be impossible for you to sustain it, and that it will not be admitted by any tribunal."

"It is not a system of defence; it is the truth."

M. Segmuller seemed to reflect for a moment; then, suddenly, he said:

"Then you have nothing to tell me about this miserable assassin?"

"But he is not an assassin, my good sir."

"What do you mean by such an assertion?"

"I mean that he has only killed others in protecting himself. They sought a quarrel with him; he stood alone against three men; he saw very plainly that he could expect no mercy from brigands who——"

She suddenly checked herself, greatly embarrassed, as if reproaching herself for having gone too far; for having given too much liberty to her tongue.

She might reasonably hope, it is true, that the judge had not observed her indiscretion.

A brand had fallen from the fire down upon the hearth; he had taken the tongs, and his attention seemed to be engrossed in the task of artistically arranging his fire.

"Who can tell me—who can assure me that it was not this man, on the contrary, who first attacked the others?" he murmured, thoughtfully.

"I can," declared the widow, stoutly; "I can swear it."

M. Segmuller looked up, intense astonishment written upon every feature.

"How can you know that?" he said, slowly. "How can you swear it? You were in your chamber when the quarrel began."

Silent and motionless in his chair, Le-

coq was inwardly jubilant. He thought that this was a most happy result, and that but a few questions more would be required to make the old woman contradict herself. He also assured himself that the proofs of her simplicity were increasing. Without a secret interest, the widow would never have undertaken the defence of the prisoner so imprudently.

"But you have probably been led to this conclusion by your knowledge of the character of the murderer, with whom you are apparently well acquainted," remarked the judge.

"I never laid eyes upon him until that evening."

"But he must have been in yonr establishment before?"

"Never in his life."

"Oh, oh! Then, you can explain how it was that on entering the bar-room, while you were sitting in your room up-stairs, this unknown person—this stranger—should have cried: 'Here, old woman!' Did he merely *guess* that the establishment was kept by a woman; and that this woman was no longer young?"

"He did not say that."

"Reflect a moment; you, yourself, just told me so."

"I did not say that, my good sir."

"Yes you did, and I will prove it by reading your deposition to you. Goquet, read, if you please."

The smiling clerk at once found the passage, and in his clearest voice he read these words, taken down as they fell from the Widow Chupin's lips.

"I had been up-stairs about half an hour, when I heard some one call from below: 'Eh! old woman' I came down," etc., etc.

"Are you convinced?" insisted M. Segmuller.

The assurance of the old offender was sensibly diminished by this set back. But instead of discussing the subject further, the judge glided over it as if he did not attach much importance to the incident.

"And the other men," he resumed, "those who were killed; did you know them?"

"No, monsieur, no more than I knew Adam and Eve."

"And were you not surprised to see three persons entirely unknown to you, and accompanied by two ladies, enter your establishment?"

"Sometimes chance———"

"Come! you do not think what you are saying. It was not chance that brought these customers, in the middle of the night, to a saloon that has a reputation like yours—a saloon that is situated so far from any frequented route, and in the midst of a desolate waste."

"I am not a sorceress; what I say, that I think."

"Then you did not know even the youngest of the victims, the man who was attired as a soldier, Gustave, in short?"

"Not at all."

M. Segmuller noted the intonation of this response, and he added more slowly:

"Certainly you must have heard allusion made to a friend of this Gustave, a man called Lacheneur?"

On hearing this name, the proprietress of the Poivriere became visibly embarrassed, and it was in an altered voice that she stammered:

"Lacheneur! Lacheneur! I have never heard that name mentioned."

She denied it, but the effect that had been produced was evident, and Lecoq secretly vowed that he would find this Lacheneur, or perish in the attempt. Was there not among the articles of conviction a letter from him, written, as he had reason to believe, in a *cafe* on the Boulevard Beaumarchais?

With such a clue and with patience!

"Now," continued M. Segmuller, "we will speak of the women who accompanied these unfortunate men. What sort of women were they?"

"Oh! some women of no account whatever!

"Were they richly dressed?"

"Very miserably, on the contrary."

"Well, give me a description of them."

"They were—my good judge, I scarcesaw them. They were large and powerfully built women, so much so, indeed, that at first, it being Shrove Sunday, I took them for men in disguise. They had hands like shoulders of mutton, gruff voices, and very black hair. They were as dark as mulattoes———"

"Enough!" interrupted the judge; "I require no further proof of your dishonesty. These women were small, and one of them was remarkably fair."

"I swear to you, my good sir———"

"Do not declare it upon oath. I shall be forced to confront you with an honest man, who will tell you that you are a liar!"

She did not reply, and there was a moment's silence. M. Segmuller decided to deal a decisive blow.

"Do you also affirm that you had nothing of a compromising character in the pocket of your apron?" he demanded.

"Nothing—you may have it examined; it was left in the house."

"Then you still persist?" resumed M. Segmuller "Believe me, you are wrong. Reflect—it depends solely upon your deposition whether you go to the Court of Assizes as a witness, or as an accomplice."

Although the widow seemed crushed

by this unexpected blow, the judge said no more. Her deposition was read, she signed it and went away.

M. Segmuller immediately seated himself at his desk, filled out a blank and handed it to his clerk, saying:

"This, Goquet, is an order to be given to the keeper of the prison. Tell him to send the murderer here at once."

CHAPTER XVII.

To extort a confession from a man interested in preserving silence and persuaded that no proofs can be produced against him, is certainly a difficult task; but to demand the truth from a *woman*, under similar circumstances, is, as they say at the Palais de Justice, "attempting to make the devil confess."

After all, what had been gained by this examination, which had been conducted with the greatest possible care by a judge who knew how to manage his questions as well as a skilful general knows how to manœuvre his troops and place them in the best possible positions.

They had discovered unexceptionable proof of the Widow Chupin's connivance with the murderer, and nothing more.

"That old hag knows all," murmured Lecoq.

"Yes," replied the judge, "it is almost certain that she knew the people who came to her house—the women, the victims, the murderer—all of them, in fact; but it is certain that she knew this Gustave—I read it in her eyes. I am also convinced that she knows this Lacheneur—this man upon whom the dying soldier breathed vengeance—this mysterious personage who evidently possesses the key to the enigma. This man must be found."

"Ah! I will find him if I have to question each of the eleven hundred thousand men who walk the streets of Paris!"

This was promising so much that the judge, in spite of his preoccupation, could not repress a smile.

"If this old woman would only decide to make a clean breast of it at her next examination!" remarked Lecoq.

"Yes. But she will never speak."

The detective shook his head despondingly. Such was his own opinion. He did not delude himself with false hopes, and he had noticed between the Widow Chupin's eyebrows, those furrows which betray the senseless obstinacy of the brute.

"Women never confess," resumed the judge; "and when they seem to resign themselves to making a revelation, it is only because they hope they have found a way to mislead the examiner. Evidence will crush the most obstinate man; he ceases to struggle; he makes a confession. A woman scoffs at evidence. Show her the sun, and she will close her eyes and reply: 'It is night.' Men plan and combine different systems of defence according to the social position in which they were born. Women have but one system, whatever their condition in life. They deny everything, and always; and they weep. When I push the Chupin with disagreeable questions, on her next examination, rest assured she will turn her eyes into a fountain of tears."

In his impatience, he angrily stamped his foot He had many weapons in his arsenal; but he could find no weapon powerful enough to break a woman's dogged resistance.

"If I only understood the motive that guides this old hag!" he continued. "But not a clue! Who can tell me what powerful interest commands her to be silent? Is it her own cause that she is defending? Is she an accomplice? Who will prove to us that she did not aid the murderer in planning an ambuscade?"

"Yes," responded Lecoq, slowly, "yes; this supposition very naturally presents itself to the mind But think a moment; such a theory would prove that the premises which you admitted, monsieur, a short time since were false. If the Widow Chupin is an accomplice, the murderer is not the person we have supposed him to be; he is simply the man whom he seems to be."

This argument was apparently convincing to M. Segmuller.

"What is your opinion?" he exclaimed

The young detective had formed his opinion. But how could he, an humble policeman, venture to express an opinion when a judge hesitated?

He fully comprehended that his position necessitated extreme reserve on his part; and it was in the most modest tone possible that he said:

"Why might not the pretended drunkard have dazzled Mother Chupin's eyes with promises of a brilliant reward? Why might he not have promised her money, a large amount?"

He paused; the clerk had returned. Behind him was a soldier, who remained respectfully upon the threshold, his heels in a straight line, his right hand upon the visor of his shako, palm turned outward, the elbow on a level with his eye, in accordance with the ordinance.

"Monsieur," said the man, "the keeper of the prison sends me to inquire if he is to keep the Widow Chupin in solitary confinement; she complains bitterly on account of it."

M. Segmuller reflected for a moment.

"Certainly," he murmured, as if replying to an objection made by his own conscience; "certainly, it is a terrible aggravation of one's suffering; but if I

allow this woman to associate with the other prisoners, she will certainly find some opportunity to communicate with parties outside. This must not be; the interests of justice and of truth must be considered first."

This last thought decided him.

"It is decided that the prisoner must be kept in solitary confinement until further orders."

The soldier allowed his right hand to fall at his side, carried his right foot three inches back of his left heel, wheeled around and departed.

When the door had closed on the soldier's retreating form, the smiling clerk drew a large envelope from his pocket, and handed it to the judge.

"Here is a communication from the keeper of the prison," he remarked.

The judge broke the seal, and read aloud:

"I feel compelled to counsel the judge to surround himself with every precaution before proceeding to the examination of the prisoner, May.

"Since his unsuccessful attempt at suicide, this prisoner has been in a state of excitement that has obliged us to confine him in a strait-jacket. He did not close his eyes during the night, and the guards who were watching him expected every moment to see him become insane. Still, he has not uttered a word.

"When food was offered him this morning, he rejected it with horror, and I should not be surprised if it were his intention to starve himself to death.

"I have rarely seen a more dangerous malefactor. I think him capable of almost any desperate act."

"Ah!" exclaimed the clerk, whose smile had disappeared, "If I were in the place of Monsieur le Juge, I would have the soldiers who brought him here come in with him."

"What! you—Goquet, you, an old clerk—make such a proposition! Can it be that you are afraid?"

"Afraid! No, certainly not; but——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Lecoq, in a tone that betrayed his confidence in his great strength; "Am I not here?"

If M. Segmuller had seated himself at his desk, that article of furniture would have served as a rampart between the prisoner and himself. He usually occupied that seat; but after the fear evinced by his clerk, he would have blushed to avail himself of the slightest protection.

He therefore took a seat by the fireplace, as he had done a few moments before while questioning the Chupin, and ordered his door-keeper to admit the prisoner alone. He emphasized the word "alone."

A second after the door was flung open with terrible violence, and the murderer entered, or rather precipitated himself, into the room.

Goquet turned pale behind his table, and Lecoq advanced a step, ready to make a spring forward.

But when he reached the centre of the room, the prisoner paused and looked around him.

"Where is the judge?" he inquired, in a hoarse voice.

"I am the judge," replied M. Segmuller.

"No, the other."

"What other?"

"The one who came to question me last evening."

"He has met with an accident. Yesterday, after leaving you, he fell and broke his leg."

"Oh!"

"And I am to take his place.

But the prisoner was apparently deaf to the explanation. A stupor had suddenly succeeded his frenzied excitement. His features, which had been so distorted with rage, relaxed. He became livid; he tottered, as if about to fall.

"Compose yourself," said the judge, in a benevolent tone; "if you are too weak to remain standing, take a seat."

Already with a powerful effort, the man had recovered his self-possession. A flame, instantly suppressed, flashed from his eyes.

"Many thanks for your kindness," he replied, "but this is nothing. I felt a slight sensation of dizziness, but it is over now."

"Is it long since you have eaten anything?"

"I have eaten nothing since this man"—he pointed to Lecoq—"brought me some bread and wine in the station-house over there."

"Do you not feel the need of something?"

"No—and yet—if you would be so good—I would like a glass of water."

"Will you not have some wine with it?"

"I should prefer the pure water."

They brought him what he desired.

He drained the first glass at a single draught; the second he drank more slowly.

One might have supposed that he was drinking in life itself. He seemed to have been born again.

CHAPTER XVIII.

EIGHTEEN out of every twenty criminals who appear before the judge are armed with a more or less complete plan of defence, which they have conceived and perfected in their solitary cells.

Innocent or guilty, they have adopted

a role that commences the instant they cross the threshold of that dread room where the magistrate awaits them.

The moment of the prisoner's entrance is one in which the judge must bring all his powers of penetration into play.

The attitude of the man as surely betrays his plan of defence as an index table reveals the contents of a book.

But in this case M. Segmuller did not think that appearances were deceitful. It was evident to him that the accused had not thought of feigning anything; and that the excited frenzy which marked his entrance was as real as his present stupor.

At least, all the danger of which the keeper had spoken was apparently over. The judge, therefore, seated himself at his desk. He felt more at ease there, and so to speak, more strong. There his back was turned to the window, his face was half hidden in shadow; and in case of need, he could, by bending over his desk, conceal his surprise, or any sign of discomfiture.

The prisoner, on the contrary, stood in the full light, and not a movement of his features, not the fluttering of an eye-lid would escape the attention of the judge.

He seemed to have entirely recovered from his indisposition; and his features had assumed an expression of careless indifference, or of complete resignation.

"Do you feel better?" inquired M. Segmuller.

"I feel very well."

"I hope," continued the judge, paternally, "that you will know how to moderate your transports after this. Yesterday you tried to destroy yourself. It would have been another great crime added to many others—a crime which ——"

With a brusque gesture, the prisoner interrupted him.

"I have committed no crime," said he, in a rough, but no longer threatening voice. "I was attacked, and I defended myself. Any one has a right to do that. There were three enraged men upon me. It was a great misfortune, and I would give my right hand to repair it; but my conscience does not reproach me—that much!"

"That much," was a contemptuous snap of his finger and thumb.

"Yet I have been arrested and treated as an assassin," he continued. "When I saw myself interred in that living tomb which you call a secret cell, I was afraid; I lost my senses. I said to myself! 'My boy, they have buried you alive; and it is better to die, and that quickly, if you do not wish to suffer.' Then I tried to strangle myself. My death would have brought sorrow to no one. I have neither wife nor child dependent upon me. To prevent me from destroying myself after, I was bled; they placed me in a straight-jacket, as if I were a madman. Mad! I really believed I should become so. All night long the jailers were around me, like children who are amusing themselves by tormenting a chained animal. They watched me; they talked about me; they passed the candle to and fro before my eyes."

All this was uttered with intense bitterness, but without any display of anger—forcibly, but with no attempt at oratorical display; uttered, in short, as one's deep emotions and convictions are always uttered.

And the same thought entered the mind of the judge and of the detective at the same instant.

"This man," they thought, "is very clever; it will not be easy to get the advantage of him."

After a moment's reflection M. Segmuller said:

"This explains your first act of despair in the prison; but later, this morning even, you refused the nourishment that was offered to you.

The man's lowering face brightened suddenly on hearing this remark; he gave a comical wink, and finally burst into a hearty laugh—a gay, frank, sonorous laugh.

"That," said he, "is quite another thing. Certainly, I refused all they offered me, and now I will tell you why. I had my hands confined in the straight-jacket, and the jailer tried to feed me as a nurse feeds a baby with broth. Ah! no, I thank you. I closed my lips with all my strength. Then he tried to force open my mouth and push the spoon in, as he would open the mouth of a sick dog and push his medicine down his throat. Devil take his impertinence! I tried to bite him; that is the truth, and if I had succeeded in getting his finger between my teeth, it would have staid there. And only because I have done this, they raise their hands to heaven in holy horror, and pointing at me say: 'Here is a terrible man! a horrible rascal!'"

He seemed to enjoy the recollection of the scene exceedingly, for he burst into another hearty laugh, to the great amazement of Lecoq, and to the great scandal of good Goquet, the clerk.

M. Segmuller also found it very difficult to conceal his intense surprise.

"You are too reasonable, I hope," said he, at last, "to attach any blame to these men, who, in confining you, were merely obeying the orders of their superior officers, and who were only trying to save you from your own violent passions."

"Hum!" responded the prisoner, becoming serious at once. "I do, however, and if I had one of them in a corner—— But I shall get over it. If I know my-

self, I have no more spite in my composition than a chicken."

"It depends only upon yourself how you are to be treated; be calm and they will never place you in a strait-jacket. But you must be quiet and well-behaved.

The murderer sadly shook his head.

"I shall be very prudent hereafter," said he; "but it is terribly hard to stay in prison when one has nothing to do. If I had comrades, we could laugh and chat, and the time would slip by; but to remain alone, entirely alone, in that cold cell, where one hears not even a sound—it is horrible. It is so damp there that the water trickles down the walls, and one might swear that the moisture was real tears, men's tears, issuing from the stone."

The judge bent over the desk to make a note. The word "comrades" had attracted his attention, and he proposed to make the prisoner explain it later.

"If you are innocent," he remarked, "you will soon be released; but it is necessary to establish your innocence."

"What must I do to establish it?"

"Tell the truth, the whole truth: answer honestly and unreservedly the questions I shall put to you."

"As for that, you may depend upon me."

He lifted his hand, as if to call upon God and man to witness his sincerity. M. Segmuller ordered him to drop it, adding:

"Parties who are accused do not take the oath."

"Indeed!" said the man, with an astonished air; "that is strange!"

Although the judge had apparently paid but little attention to the prisoner, he had not failed to notice his every movement. He had desired to reassure him, to make him feel at ease, to quiet his suspicions as much as possible; and he believed that this result had been attained.

"Now, said he, "you will give me your attention; and do not forget that your liberty depends upon your frankness. What is your name?"

"May."

"What is your christian name?"

"I have none."

"That is impossible."

A movement of the prisoner betrayed an impatience which was quickly suppressed.

"This," he replied, "is the third time since yesterday, I have received that answer. What I told you is the truth, however. If I were a liar, nothing would be easier than for me to tell you that my name was Peter, James, or John. Rut lying is not my *forte*. Really, I have no christian name. If it were a question of surnames, it would be quite another thing. I have had plenty of them."

"What were they?"

"Let me see—to commence with, when I was with Father Fougasse, I was called Affiloir, because, you see———"

"Who was this Father Fougasse?"

"The king of men for wild beasts, monsieur. Ah! he could boast of a menagerie that was a menagerie. Tigers, lions, paroquets of every color, serpents as large as your thigh—he had everything. But unfortunately———"

Was the man jesting, or was he in earnest? It was so hard to decide, that M. Segmuller and Lecoq were equally in doubt. Goquet, while writing his report, laughed.

"Enough," interrupted the judge, "How old are you?"

"Forty-four or forty-five years of age."

"Where were you born?"

"In Brittany, probably."

In this reply, M. Segmuller thought he discovered an inclination to levity, which must be repressed.

"I warn you," said he, severely, "that if you go on in this way your liberty will be greatly compromised. Each of your responses is a breach of propriety."

The most sincere distress, mingled with anxiety, was visible upon the countenance of the murderer.

"Ah! I meant no offence, sir," he sighed. "You questioned me and I replied. You will see that I have spoken the truth, if you will allow me to tell you the history of the whole affair."

CHAPTER XIX.

"WHEN the prisoner speaks, the prosecution is instructed," is an old proverb at the Palais de Justice.

It does, indeed, seem almost impossible for a culprit, closely watched by the judge, to speak more than a few words without betraying his intentions or his thoughts; without, in short, revealing more or less of the secret he is endeavoring to conceal.

Even the most simple-minded of criminals understand this, and those who are most shrewd, are generally most reserved.

Confining themselves entirely to the few facts upon which they have founded their defence, they leave this safe ground only when they are absolutely compelled to do so, and then only with the utmost caution.

When questioned, they reply of course, but always briefly; and they are very sparing of details.

In this case, however, the accused was prodigal of words. He did not seem to apprehend that there was danger lest he should cut his own throat. He did not hesitate like those who are fearful of

misplacing a word of the romance they are substituting for the truth.

Under other circumstances this fact would have been a strong argument in his favor.

"You may tell your own story, then," was M. Segmuller's response to the indirect request of the prisoner.

The murderer did not attempt to conceal the joy which had been awakened in his heart by being allowed to plead his own cause, in his own way.

The sparkling of his eyes, the dilation of his nostrils revealed his satisfaction.

He seated himself, threw his head back, passed his tongue over his lips as if to moisten them, and said:

"Am I to understand that you wish to hear my history?"

"Yes."

"Then you must know that one day about forty-five years ago, Father Tringlot, the manager of a traveling company of athletes and acrobats, was going from Guingamp to Sainte-Briene. He was making the journey in two large carriages with his wife, his equipments, and the members of his company. Very well. But soon after leaving quite a large city named Chatelaudren, he perceived something white lying by the roadside, near the edge of a ditch. 'I must go and see what that is," he said to his wife. He stopped the horses, descended from the carriage, went to the ditch, picked up the object and uttered a cry of surprise. You will ask me 'what this man has found?' Ah! *mon Dieu!* A mere trifle. He had found your very humble servant; then aged about six months."

With these last words, he made a low bow to his auditors.

"Naturally, Father Tringlot carried me to his wife," he continued. "She was a kind-hearted woman. She took me, examined me, fed me, and said: 'He is a strong, healthy child; we will keep him, since his mother has been so wicked as to abandon him. I will teach him; and in five or six years he will be an honor to us.' Then they tried to decide upon a name for me. It was in the early part of the month of May, so they concluded to call me May; and May I have been from that day to this."

He paused, and looked from one to another of his listeners, as if seeking some sign of approval.

None being forthcoming, he went on with his story:

"Father Tringlot was an uneducated man, and entirely ignorant of the law. He did not inform the authorities that he had found a child, and for this reason, although I was living, I did not exist, for to exist it is necessary to have one's name and birth inscribed upon the mayor's register.

"When I became older, I rather congratutated myself on this omission on Father Tringlot's part.

"I said to myself: 'May, my boy, you have no place on any government register, consequently there is no fear that you will ever be drawn as a soldier.'

"I had no desire to be a soldier; no fancy for being made food for bullets and cannon-balls.

"Afterwards, when the age for conscription had passed, a lawyer told me that I would make a great deal of trouble for myself if I sought a place on the civil register at that late day; so I decided to exist surreptitiously.

"And this is why I have no Christian name, and why I cannot say exactly where I was born."

If truth has any particular accent of its own, as moralists have asserted, the murderer had found that accent.

Voice, gesture, glance, expression, all were in accord; not a word of his long story had rung false.

"Now," said M. Segmuller, coldly, "what are your means of subsistence?"

By the discomfited mien of the murderer one would have supposed that he had expected to see his prison doors fly open at the conclusion of his last remarks.

"I have a profession," he replied, plaintively. The one taught me by Mother Tringlot. I subsist by its practice; and I have lived in France and in other countries."

The judge thought he had found a flaw in the armor.

"Do you say you have lived in foreign countries?" he inquired.

"Yes; during the seventeen years that I formed a part of M. Simpson's company, I traveled most of the time in England and in Germany."

"Then you are a gymnast and an athlete. How is it that your hands are so white and so soft?"

Far from being embarassed, the prisoner lifted his hands and examined them with evident complacency.

"It is true that they are pretty," said he; "that is because I take good care of them and do not use them."

"Do they pay you, then, for doing nothing?"

"Ah, no, indeed! But, sir, my duty consists in speaking to the public, in turning a compliment, and in making things pass off pleasantly, as the saying is; and, without boasting, I flatter myself that I have a certain knack———"

M. Segmuller stroked his chin, according to his habit when a prisoner committed some grave blunder.

"In that case," said he, "will you give me an exhibition of your talent?"

"Ah, ha," laughed the man, evidently

supposing this a jest on the part of the magistrate. "Ah, ha!"

"Obey, if you please," insisted the judge.

The murderer made no objection. His mobile face immediately assumed an entirely different expression; a singular mixture of impudence, conceit and irony played upon his features.

He caught up a ruler that was lying upon the desk, and in a shrill falsetto voice, and with many flourishes, he began:

"Silence, music! And you, big drum, hold your peace! This, ladies and gentlemen, is the hour, the moment, and the instant for the grand and only performance of these great artists; unequaled in the world in their feats upon the trapeze and on the tight-rope, and in other exercises of grace, suppleness and strength."

"That is sufficient," interrupted the judge. "You can speak thus in France; but what do you say in Germany?"

"Of course, I use the language of that country."

"Let us see!" commanded M. Segmuller, whose mother tongue was German.

The prisoner dropped his mocking manner, assumed an air of comical importance, and, without the slightest hesitation he said, in very emphatic tones:

"*Mit Bewilligung der hochloeblichen Obrigkeit wird heute vor hiesiger ehrenwerthen Burgerschaft zum* erstenmal *aufge fuhrt*—Genovesa, oder del———"*

"Enough," said the judge, harshly.

He rose to conceal his chagrin, perhaps; and added:

"We will send for an interpreter who can tell us whether you speak English as fluently."

On hearing these words, Lecoq modestly stepped forward.

"I speak English," said he

"Very well. You hear, prisoner?"

But the man was already transformed. Brittanic gravity and apathy were written upon his features; his gestures were stiff and constrained, and it was in the most ponderous tones that he said:

"Ladies and gentlemen: Long life to our queen, and to the honorable mayor of this town! No country, England excepted—our glorious England!—could produce such a marvellous thing, such a paragon———"

For a minute or two longer he continued in the same strain.

M. Segmuller was leaning upon his desk, his face bowed upon his hands Lecoq could not conceal his astonishment

Only Goquet, the smiling clerk, found the scene amusing.

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*"With the permission of the local authorities, there will now be presented before the honorable citizens, for the first time—Genevieve, or the——"

CHAPTER XX.

THE keeper of the depot, a functionary who had gained the reputation of being an oracle by twenty years of experience in prisons and with prisoners—a man whom it was difficult to deceive—had written to the judge:

"Surround yourself with every precaution before examining the prisoner, May."

And instead of the dangerous malefactor, the very announcement of whose coming had made the clerk turn pale, the prisoner proved to be a practical, harmless, and jovial philosopher, vain of his eloquence, a man whose existence depended upon his ability to turn a compliment; in short, a somewhat erratic genius.

This was a strange mistake. But this did not cause M. Segmuller to abandon the theory advanced by Lecoq, he had become more than ever convinced of its truth.

If he remained silent, with his elbows propped upon his desk, and his hands clasped over his eyes, it was only that he might gain time for reflection.

The manner and attitude of the prisoner was remarkable.

When his English "compliment" was ended, he remained standing in the centre of the room, his countenance wearing an expression half pleased, half anxious. But he was as much at ease as if he were upon the stage where, if one could believe his story, he had passed the greater part of his life.

By the combined efforts of all his intellectual powers and his penetration, the judge attempted to seize upon something, even if it were only some indication of weakness on this face, which in its mobility was more enigmatical than the bronze face of the sphinx.

Thus far M. Segmuller had been worsted in the encounter.

It is true, however, that he had made no direct attack, nor had he made use of any of the weapons which Lecoq had forged for his use.

But he was none the less annoyed at his defeat. It was easy to discern this by the brusque manner in which he lifted his head after a few moments of silence.

"I see that you speak three European languages correctly," said he. "It is a rare talent."

The prisoner bowed, and smiled complacently.

"But that does not establish your identity," continued the judge. "Have you any acquaintances in Paris? Can you indicate any respectable person who will vouch for the truth of this story?"

"Ah! monsieur, it is seventeen years since I left France."

"It is unfortunate, but the prosecution would not be content with such reasons. It would be too easy to escape the consequences of one's former life. Tell me of your last patron, M. Simpson. Who was this man?"

"M. Simpson is a rich man," replied the prisoner, rather coldly, "worth more than two hundred thousand francs, and honest. In Germany he traveled with a show of marionettes, in England with a collection of phenomena, to suit the taste of the country."

"Very well! This millionaire could testify in your favor; it would be easy to find him, I suppose."

"Certainly," May responded, emphatically. "M. Simpson would willingly do me this favor. It would be easy enough to find him, only it would require considerable time."

"Why?"

"Beeause at the present moment he is—he must be *en route* to America. It was on account of this journey that I left his company—I detest the ocean."

The intense anxiety that had stopped the beatings of Lecoq's heart was dissipated. He breathed again.

"Ah!" said the judge, very slowly.

"When I say that he is *en route*," resumed the prisoner, "I may be mistaken. He may not have started yet. But he had arranged all his business matters for departure before we separated.

"Upon what ship was he to sail?"

"He did not tell me."

"Where was he when you left him?"

"At Leipsic."

"When was this?"

"Last Wednesday."

M. Segmuller shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"Do you say you were in Leipsic on Wednesday? How long have you been in Paris?"

"Since Sunday afternoon, at four o'clock."

"It will be necessary to prove that."

By the contracted brow of the murderer, one would naturally have supposed that he was making a strenuous effort to remember something. For about a minute he seemed to be seeking something. He cast questioning glances first at the ceiling then at the floor, scratching his head and tapping his foot in evident perplexity.

"How *can* I prove it—how?" he murmured.

The judge did not appear disposed to wait.

"I will make a suggestion to aid you," said he. "The people at the inn where you boarded while in Leipsic must remember you."

"We did not stop at an inn."

"Where did you eat and sleep, then?"

"In M. Simpson's large traveling-carriage; it had been sold, but he was not to give it up until he reached the port from which he was to embark."

"What port was that?"

"I do not know."

Less accustomed to concealing his impressions than the judge, Lecoq could not help rubbing his hands, so great was his satisfaction. He saw that the prisoner was convicted of falsehood—"driven to the wall," as he expressed it.

"So you have only your own affirmation to offer in support of this story?" inquired the judge.

"Wait a moment," said the accused, extending his arm as if to clutch a still vague inspiration—"wait a moment. When I arrived in Paris I had a trunk; it contains my linen, which is all marked with the first letter of my name. There are also some coats, several pairs of pantaloons, and two costumes for wear when I appear in public."

"Go on."

"On my arrival in Paris I took this trunk to a hotel quite near the railway station."

He stopped short, evidently embarrassed.

"What is the name of this hotel?" demanded the judge.

"Alas! that is exactly what I am trying to recollect. I have forgotten it. But I have not forgotten the house. I can see it yet; and, if some one would take me to the neighborhood, I should certainly recognize it. The people at the hotel would know me; besides, my trunk would prove the truth of my story."

Lecoq mentally resolved to make a tour of investigation through the hotels which surrounded the northern depot.

"Very well," remarked the judge. "Perhaps we will do as you request. Now, there are two questions which I desire to ask. If you arrived in Paris at four o'clock in the afternoon, how did it happen that by midnight of the same day you had found the Poivriere, a haunt of notorious characters, situated in a lonely spot, and which it would be impossible to find at night if one was not familiar with the locality? In the second place, how does it happen, if you possess such clothing as you describe, that you are so poorly dressed?"

The man smiled at these questions.

"That is what I will explain to you," he responded.

"When one travels third-class, one is sure to ruin one's clothing; that is why, on leaving Leipsic I put on the worst clothing I had. When I arrived here, and felt the pavements of Paris beneath my feet, I went wild with delight. I became a fool. I had some money in my pocket—it was Shrove Sunday—my only thought was to make a night of it. I did not think of changing my clothes.

Having formerly found much amusement near the Barriere d'Italie, I hastened there, and entered a wine-shop. While I was eating a morsel, two men came in and began talking about spending the night at a ball at the Rainbow. I asked them to take me with them; they consented. I paid their bill, and we started. But soon after our arrival there these young men left me and joined the dancers. It was not long before I began to weary of playing the part of looker-on. Vexed and disappointed, I left the inn, and being foolish enough to dislike to ask my way, I wandered on and lost my way while traversing a large tract of unoccupied land. I was about to retrace my steps ,when I saw a light in the distance. I walked straight towards it, and arrived at that cursed hovel."

"What happened then?"

"Oh! I went in; called for some one. A woman came. I asked for a glass of brandy; she brought it. I sat down and lighted a cigar. Then I looked about me. The interior was horrible enough to frighten one. Three men and two women were drinking and chatting in low tones at another table. My face did not seem to suit them. One of them rose, came to me and said: 'You are a policeman; you have come here to play the spy on us; that is very plain.' I answered that I was not. He replied that I was. I again declared that I was not. In short, he swore that he was sure of it, and that I had on a false beard. Thereupon he caught hold of my beard and pulled it. This made me mad. I jumped up, and with a blow of my fist felled him to the ground. Misery! In an instant all the others were upon me! I had my revolver—you know the rest."

"And the two women, while this was going on, what were they doing?"

"Ah! I was too busy to pay any attention to them. They disappeared!"

"But you saw them when you entered the saloon—what were they like?"

"They were, upon my word! two big, ugly creatures, as tall as grenadiers, and as dark as moles!"

Between plausible falsehood and improbable truth, justice, human justice, and therefore liable to error, is compelled to decide as best it can.

For the past hour M. Segmuller had not been free from mental disquietude. But his doubts all vanished when he heard the prisoner declare that the two women were tall and dark.

In his opinion this audacious falsehood proved that there was a perfect understanding between the murderer and the Widow Chupin.

If the man had said: "The women were fair," M. Segmuller would not have known what to believe.

Certainly, his satisfaction was great; but his face did not betray it. It was of the utmost importance that the prisoner should believe that he had succeeded in deceiving the judge.

"You must understand how necessary it is to find these women," said the judge kindly. "If their testimony corresponds with your allegations, your innocence will be proved conclusively."

"Yes, I understand that; but how can I put my hand upon them?"

"The police can aid you—these agents are always at the service of prisoners who desire to make use of them in establishing their innocence. Did you make any observations which might aid in the discovery of these women?"

Lecoq, whose eyes never wandered from the prisoner's face, fancied that he saw the least shadow of a smile on the man's lips.

"I remarked nothing," he said coldly.

M. Segmuller had opened the drawer of his desk a moment before. He now took from it the ear-ring which had been found at the scene of the tragedy, and, handing it abruptly to the prisoner, he asked:

"So you did not notice this in the ear of one of the women?"

The imperturbable coolness of the accused did not forsake him.

He took the ornament, examined it attentively, held it up to the light, admired its brilliant fires, and said:

"It is a very handsome stone; but I did not notice it."

"This stone," remarked the judge, "is a diamond."

"Ah!"

"Yes; and worth several thousand francs."

"So much as that!"

This exclamation was in accord with the spirit of his role; but the prisoner had failed to assume a suitable show of simplicity, or rather, he had exaggerated it.

A nomad like himself, who had, as he claimed, visited all the capitals of Europe, would not have been so astonished on hearing the value of a diamond.

Still, M. Segmuller did not seem to notice the discrepancy.

"Another thing," said he. "When you threw down your pistol, crying: 'Come and take me,' what did you intend to do?"

"I intended to make my escape."

"In what way?"

"*Dame!*—by the door, sir,—by———"

"Yes, by the back door," said the judge, with freezing irony. "It remains for you to explain how you—you who had just entered that hovel for the first time—could have known of this door."

For the first time, the eye of the prisoner grew troubled; his assurance dis-

appeared. But it was only for an instant; then he laughed, but it was a false laugh, that poorly concealed his anxiety.

"What nonsense!" he responded. "I had just seen the two women go out by that door."

"Pardon me, you have just declared that you did not see the departure of these women; that you were too busy to watch their movements."

"Did I say that?"

"Word for word; the passage shall be read to you. Goquet, read."

The clerk read the passage referred to, but the man undertook to show that they had misunderstood his remark. "He had not said—at least, he did not intend to say—they had quite misunderstood him ——"

Lecoq was jubilant.

"Ah! my good fellow," he thought, "you contradict yourself—you are in deep water—you are lost."

This reflection was the more just as the situation of the prisoner was like that of a man who, without knowing how to swim, had advanced into the sea until the water was above his chin. Thus far he had preserved his equilibrium very well; but now he totters—soon he loses his footing—he sinks!

"Enough—enough!" said the judge. "Now, if you started out merely with the intention of amusing yourself, how did it happen that you took your pistol with you?"

"I had it with me while I was traveling, and I did not think to leave it at the hotel any more than I thought to change my clothes."

"Where did you purchase it?"

"It was given me by M. Simpson as a souvenir."

"Confess that this M. Simpson is a very convenient personage," said the judge coldly. "Still, go on with your story. Two chambers only of this murderous weapon have been discharged, and three men were killed. You have not told me the end of the affair."

"Alas!" exclaimed the man, in saddened tones, "what is the use? Two of my assailants had fallen; the struggle now was an equal one. I seized the remaining man, the soldier, about the body, and threw him down. He fell against a corner of the table, and did not rise again."

M. Segmuller had unfolded upon his desk the plan of the saloon drawn by Lecoq.

"Come here," he said, addressing the prisoner, "and indicate upon the paper the precise spot occupied by you and by your adversaries."

May obeyed, and with an assurance of manner a little surprising in a man in his apparent position, he explained the drama.

"I entered," said he, "by this door, marked C; I seated myself at the table, H, which is to the left of the entrance; the others occupied this table, which is between the fire-place, F, and the window, B.

When he had finished:

"I must admit," said the judge, "that your assertions are in perfect accord with the statements of the physicians, who say that one of the shots must have been fired at a distance of about a yard, and the other, at a distance of about two yards."

The accused had triumphed; but he only shrugged his shoulders and murmured:

"That proved that the physicians knew their business."

Lecoq was delighted; he felt that, had he been a judge, he would have conducted this examination in precisely the same way.

He blessed Heaven that had given him M. Segmuller, in place of M. d'Escorval.

"This admitted," resumed the judge, "there remains to be explained a sentence uttered by you when this agent, whom you see here, arrested you."

"What sentence?"

"You said: 'It is the Prussians who are coming; I am lost!' What did you mean by that?"

A fleeting crimson tinged the cheek of the prisoner. It was evident that he had anticipated the other questions, and that he had been prepared for them; but that this one was unexpected.

"It is very strange," said he, "with ill-disguised embarrassment, "that I should have said such a thing!"

"Five persons heard you," insisted the judge.

Evidently he was endeavoring to gain time; he was hunting for an explanation.

"After all," replied the man, "the thing is very possible. It was a phrase that was often repeated by an old soldier of Napoleon's body-guard, who, after the battle of Waterloo, entered the service of M. Simpson."

This explanation, though rather slow in coming, was none the less ingenious. At last M. Segmuller appeared to be perfectly satisfied.

"That is very plausible," said he; "but there is one circumstance that passes my comprehension. Were you freed from your assailants before the entrance of the policemen? Answer me, yes or no."

"Yes."

"Then, why, instead of making your escape by the door, whose existence you had divined, did you remain upon the threshold of the communicating door, with a table before you to serve as a barricade, your pistol directed toward the police, holding them at bay?"

The man hung his head, and they were obliged to wait for his response.

"I was a fool," he stammered, at last. "I did not know whether these men were agents of the police force or friends of the men I had killed."

"Your self-interest would have impelled you to flee from one as well as from the other."

The murderer was silent.

"Ah, well!" resumed M. Segmuller, "the prosecution is of the opinion that you designedly and voluntarily exposed yourself to the danger of arrest in order to protect the retreat of the two women who were in the saloon."

"Why should I have risked my own safety for two hussies whom I did not even know?"

"Pardon me. The prosecution are strongly inclined to believe that you know these two women very well."

"I should like to see any one prove this!"

He laughed sneeringly, but the laugh was frozen upon his lips by the tone of assurance in which the judge uttered these words:

"I will prove this to you!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THESE difficult and delicate questions of personal identity are the bane of magistrates.

Railroads, photography, and telegraphic communication have multiplied the means of investigation in vain. Every day it happens that malefactors succeed in deceiving the judge in regard to their true personality, and thus escape the consequences of their former crimes.

This is so frequently the case that a witty attorney-general once laughingly remarked—and, perhaps, he was only half in jest:

"This uncertainty in regard to identity will cease only on the day when the law prescribes that a number shall be branded upon the shoulder of every child whose birth is reported to the mayor."

M. Segmuller certainly wished that a number had been branded upon the enigmatical prisoner before him.

And yet he did not by any means despair, and his confidence, exaggerated though it might be, was not feigned.

He thought this circumstance in connection with the two women was the weak spot in the prisoner's plan of defence—the point upon which he must concentrate all his efforts.

When he felt that his threat had had time to produce its full effect, he continued:

"So, prisoner, you assert that you were acquainted with none of the persons you met in the saloon?"

"I swear it."

"Have you never had occasion to meet one Lacheneur, an individual whose name is connected with this unfortuate affair?"

"I heard this name for the first time when the dying soldier uttered it, adding that this Lacheneur was an old comedian."

He heaved a deep sigh, and continued:

"Poor soldier! I had just dealt him his death blow; and yet his last words testified to my innocence."

This sentimental outburst produced no impression whatever upon the magistrate.

"Consequently," resumed the judge, "you are willing to accept the deposition of this soldier?"

The man hesitated, as if conscious that he had fallen into a snare, and that he would be obliged to weigh each response carefully.

"I accept it," said he, at last. "Of course, I accept it."

"Very well. This soldier, you must recollect, wished to revenge himself upon Lacheneur, who, by promising him money, had inveigled him into a conspiracy. A conspiracy against whom? Evidently against you; and yet you pretend that you had only arrived in Paris that evening, and that the merest chance had alone brought you to the Poivriere. Can you reconcile such conflicting statements?"

The prisoner had the hardihood to shrug his shoulders, disdainfully.

"I see the matter in an entirely different light," said he. "These people were plotting mischief against—I do not know whom—and it was because I was in their way that they sought a quarrel with me, without any cause whatever."

The judge's sword-thrust had been skillfully made, but it had been as skillfully parried; so skillfully, indeed, that the smiling clerk could not conceal an approving grimace. Besides, on principle, he always took the part of the prisoner—in a very mild way, understand.

"Let us consider the circumstances that followed your arrest," resumed M. Segmuller. "Why did you refuse to answer all questions?"

A gleam of real or assumed resentment shone in the eyes of the prisoner.

"This examination," he growled, "will be quite sufficient to make a culprit out of an innocent man!"

"I advise you, in your own interest, to deport yourself properly. Those who arrested you observed that you were conversant with all the formalities, and with the rules of the prison."

"Ah! sir, have I not told you that I have been arrested and put in prison

several times—always on account of my papers. I told you the truth, and consequently you should not taunt me."

He had dropped his mask of careless gayety, and had assumed a surly, discontented tone.

But his troubles were not ended; the battle had but just begun. M. Segmuller laid a tiny linen bag upon his desk

"Do you recognize this?" he asked.

"Perfectly! It is the package that was placed in the safe by the keeper of the prison."

The judge opened the bag, and poured the dust that it contained out upon a sheet of paper

"You are aware, prisoner," said he, "that this dust is from the mud that adhered to your feet. The agent of police who collected it went to the station-house where you had spent the preceding night, and he has discovered between this dust and the earth which forms the floor of the station-house a perfect uniformity."

The man listened with wide-open mouth.

"Hence," continued the judge, "it was certainly at the station-house, and *designedly*, that you soiled your feet in the mud. What was your object?"

"I wished———"

"Let me finish. Resolved to guard the secret of your identity, and to assume the individuality of a man of the lower orders of society—of a mountebank, if you please—you reflected that the delicacy of your appearance would betray you. You foresaw the impression that would be produced when, upon removing the coarse, ill-fitting boots that you wore, the officers saw shapely, nicely-cared for feet like yours; for they are as well kept as your hands. What did you do, therefore? You emptied upon the ground the water that was in the pitcher in your cell, and then dabbled your feet in the mud that had been formed."

During these remarks the face of the prisoner had expressed, by turns, anxiety, the most comical astonishment, irony, and at last a frank gayety.

At the conclusion, he seemed unable to restrain the burst of merriment which prevented him from making any reply.

"This is what one gets by searching around for twelve or fourteen hours," he said, as soon as he could speak, and addressing not the judge, but Lecoq. "Ah! Mister Agent, it is well to be sharp, but not so sharp as that. The truth is, that when I was taken to the station-house, forty-eight hours—thirty-six of them spent on the railroad cars—had elapsed since I had taken off my shoes. My feet were red, swollen, and burned like fire. What did I do? I poured some water on them. As for your other suspicions, if I have a soft and white skin, it is only because I take care of myself. Besides, as is usual with most men in my profession, I never wear anything but slippers on my feet This is so true, that on leaving Leipsic, I owned only one pair of boots, and that was an old cast-off pair given me by M. Simpson."

Lecoq struck himself upon the breast. "Fool, imbecile, idiot, that I am!" he thought. "He was waiting to be questioned in regard to this circumstance. When this man, who is wonderfully shrewd, saw me take this dust, he divined my intentions; he has been seeking for an explanation, and he has found it—and it is a plausible one—any jury would believe it."

M. Segmuller was saying the same thing to himself. But he was not so surprised nor so overcome by the cleverness of the prisoner.

"Let us continue," said he. "Do you still persist in your affirmations, prisoner?"

"Yes."

"Very well; then I shall be forced to tell you that you are saying what is untrue."

The prisoner's lips trembled very visibly, and he faltered:

"May my first mouthful of bread strangle me, if I have uttered a single falsehood!"

"A single falsehood!—wait."

The judge took from his desk-drawer the molds of the foot-prints, which Lecoq had made, and showing them to the murderer, he said:

"You have told me that these women were as tall as grenadiers; now see the footprints made by these immense women. "They were as 'dark as moles,' you said; a witness will tell you that one of them was a small, very delicate blonde, with an exceedingly sweet voice."

He sought the prisoner's eyes, found them, and added slowly:

"And this witness is the coachman whose carriage was hired in the Rue de Chevaleret by the two fugitives."

This sentence fell upon the prisoner like a thunderbolt; he grew pale, tottered and leaned against the wall to keep himself from falling.

"Ah! you have told me the truth!" scornfully continued the pitiless judge. "Who, then, is this man who was waiting for you while you were in the Poivriere? Who is this accomplice who, after your arrest, dared to enter the Widow Chupin's hut to regain something compromising in its nature—a letter, undoubtedly—which he knew he would find in the pocket of the Widow Chupin's apron? Who is this devoted and courageous friend who feigned drunkenness so effectually that even the police were deceived, and placed him in confinement

with you? Dare you deny that you have not arranged your system of defence in concert with him? Can you affirm that he did not give the Widow Chupin counsel as to the course she must pursue?"

But already, thanks to an almost superhuman effort, the man had mastered his agitation.

"All this," said he, in a harsh voice, "is a mere invention of the police!"

However faithfully one may describe an examination of this sort, it gives the reader no more idea of the scene than cold ashes give the effect of a glowing fire.

One can note down the slightest word; but one can never portray the repressed animation, the impassioned movements, the studied reticence, the intonation, the glances full of hatred and suspicion which encounter each other—in short, the terrible anguish of a mortal struggle.

When the prisoner reeled beneath the power of his accusation, the judge trembled with joy.

"He weakens," he thought, "he yields—he is mine!"

But all hope of immediate success vanished when he saw this redoubtable adversary struggle against his momentary weakness, and arm himself for the fight with a renewed and still more vigorous energy.

The judge comprehended that it would require more than one assault to overcome such a nature.

So, in a voice rendered still more harsh by disappointment, he resumed:

"Evidently you are determined to deny evidence itself."

The murderer had turned to bronze again. He must have bitterly regretted his weakness, for a fiendish audacity glittered in his eyes.

"What evidence!" he demanded, frowning. "This romance invented by the police is very plausible, I do not deny it; but it seems to me that the truth is quite as probable. You tell me of a coachman, who was employed by two small, fair-haired women—who can prove that those women are the same who fled from this accursed hovel?"

"The police officer followed their tracks upon the snow."

"At night, across fields cut every now and then by ditches, and up a long street, while a fine rain was falling and a thaw was beginning! That is very probable!"

He extended his arm towards Lecoq, and in a tone of crushing scorn, he added:

"A man must have great confidence in himself, or a wild longing for advancement, to ask that a man's head should be cut off on such evidence as this!"

While the smiling clerk made his pen fly across the paper, he said to himself:

"The arrow entered the bull's eye this time!"

The reproach did indeed seem just; and it cut Lecoq to the quick. He was so incensed, that forgetful of the place in which he was, he sprang up, furious.

"This circumstance would be of slight importance," said he, vehemently, "if it were not one of a long chain——"

"Silence!" interrupted the judge.

Then turning to the prisoner he said:

"The court does not use proofs and testimony collected by the police until it has examined and weighed them."

"No matter," murmured the man. "I would like to see this coachman."

"Have no fears; he shall repeat his deposition in your presence."

"Very well. I am satisfied then. I will ask him how he can distinguish people's faces when it is as dark as——"

He checked himself, enlightened apparently by a sudden inspiration.

"How stupid I am!" he exclaimed. "I lose my temper about these people while you know all the while who they are. For you know, do you not, since the coachman must of course have taken them to their homes."

M. Segmuller saw that the man understood him. He saw, too, that he was endeavoring to increase the shadow of doubt and uncertainty that overhung the very point upon which the prosecution was so anxious to obtain information.

An incomparable comedian, the man had uttered these words with an accent of the most sincere candor. But the irony was evident, and if he sneered, it was because he felt that he had nothing to fear from this quarter.

"If you are consistent," remarked the judge, "you will also deny the existence of an accomplice, of a—comrade."

"Of what use would it be to deny it, since you believe nothing that I say? You only a moment ago insinuated that my former employer was an imaginary personage; what shall I say of this pretended accomplice? Ah! the agents who invented him have made him indeed a faithful friend. Not content with escaping them once, he comes to place himself in their clutches for a second time. These gentlemen pretend that he conferred first with me, and afterwards with the Widow Chupin. How did *that* happen? Perhaps, after they took him from the cell in which I was confined, they shut him up with the old woman."

Goquet the clerk wrote and admired.

"Here," he thought, "is a man of brain, who understands his case, and who will have no need of the eloquence of a lawyer in pleading his cause before a jury."

"And after all," continued the prisoner, "what are the proofs against me? The name Lacheneur, faltered by a dying

man, some foot-prints upon the melting snow, the declaration of a coachman, a vague suspicion on the subject of a drunken man. Are these all? They do not amount to much———"

"Enough!" interrupted M Segmuller. "Your assurance is great now, but your embarrassment a moment since was even greater. What was the cause of it?"

"The cause!" exclaimed the prisoner, in a sort of rage; "the cause! Can you not see, monsieur, that you are torturing me frightfully, pitilessly? I am an innocent man, and you are trying to deprive me of my life. You have been turning me this way and that for so many hours, that I begin to feel as if I were standing on the guillotine; and at each word that I utter, I ask myself if this is the one that will make the axe fall upon my head. My anxiety and dismay surprise you, do they, when I have felt the cold knife graze my throat at least twenty times? I would not desire my worst enemy to be subjected to torture like this."

He was, indeed, suffering terribly. His hair was saturated with perspiration, and great drops of sweat stood out upon his cheeks and rolled from his pallid brow down upon his beard.

"I am not your enemy," said the judge, more gently. "A judge is neither the friend nor the enemy of a prisoner; he is simply the friend of truth and of the law I am not seeking an innocent man or a culprit; I merely wish to arrive at the truth. I must know who you are—and I do know "

"Ah!—if the assertion costs me my life—I am May "

"No."

"Who am I, then? Some great man in disguise? Ah! I would that I were! In that case, I should have satisfactory papers. I would show them to you, and you would set me free, for you know very well, my good sir, that I am as innocent as yourself."

The judge had left his desk, and seated himself by the fire-place, only a couple of feet from the prisoner

"Do not insist," said he.

Then suddenly changing both manner and tone, he added with the urbanity that a man of the world displays when addressing an equal:

"Do me the honor, monsieur, to believe me gifted with sufficient perspicuity to recognize, under the difficult *role* that you play to such perfection, a very superior gentleman—a man endowed with remarkable talent."

Lecoq saw that this sudden change of manner had unmanned the prisoner.

He tried to laugh, but the laugh died in his throat as mournful as a sob, and tears glittered in his eyes.

"I will not torture you any longer, monsieur," continued the judge. "Upon this ground of subtle reasoning I confess that you have conquered me. When I return to the charge I shall have proofs enough in my possession to crush you.

He reflected for a moment, then slowly, and lingering over each word, he added.

"Only do not expect from me then the consideration I have shown you to-day. Justice is human, monsieur; that is, she is indulgent to certain crimes. She has fathomed the depths of the abyss into which blind passion may hurl even an honest man. To-day, any assistance that will not conflict with my duty I freely offer to you. Speak, monsieur. Shall I send away this officer of police? Do you wish me to send my clerk out of the room upon some errand?"

He said no more. He waited to see the effect of this last, this supreme effort.

The murderer darted upon him one of those glances that penetrate to the depths of one's inmost soul. His lips moved; one might have supposed that he was about to speak. But no, he crossed his arms upon his breast and murmured:

"You are very frank, monsieur. Unfortunately for me, I am only a poor devil, as I have told you, May, artist—to speak to the public and turn a compliment."

"I am forced to yield to your decision," said the judge, sadly "The clerk will now read the report of your examination—listen."

Goquet read the deposition.

The prisoner listened without making any remark, but when the reading was concluded he refused to sign the document, fearing, he said, "some hidden treachery."

A moment after, the soldiers who had brought him there, led him away

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CHAPTER XXII

WHEN the prisoner had departed, M. Segmuller sank back in his arm-chair, weary, exhausted, and in that state of nervous prostration which so often follows protracted, but fruitless efforts.

He had scarcely strength to bathe his burning forehead and his glittering eyes in cool, refreshing water This frightful scene had lasted for seven consecutive hours, at least.

The smiling clerk, who all the while had kept his place at his desk, busily writing, rose, glad of an opportunity to stretch his limbs and snap his fingers, cramped by holding the pen.

Still, he was not in the least bored. These dramas which had been unrolled in his presence for so many years, had never ceased to afford him a half-theatrical interest, increased by the uncer-

tainty in which the denouement was shrouded, and by the consciousness of some slight participation in the affair.

"What a knave!" he exclaimed, after vainly waiting some expression of opinion from the judge or from the detective; "what a rascal!"

Ordinarily, M. Segmuller accorded some degree of confidence to the long experience of his clerk. He sometimes even went so far as to consult him, doubtless somewhat in the same style that Moliere consulted his servant.

But this time he did not accept his opinion.

"No," said he in a thoughtful tone, "that man is not a knave. When I spoke to him kindly he was really touched; he wept, he hesitated. I would have sworn that he was about to confide everything to me."

"Ah!" he is a remarkable man—a man of wonderful power!" said Lecoq.

The detective was sincere in his praise. Although the prisoner had disappointed his plans, and had even insulted him, he could not help admiring his adversary's shrewdness and courage.

He had prepared himself to struggle with this man to the death—he hoped to conquer him. Nevertheless, in his secret soul Lecoq experienced that sympathy which a "foeman worthy of one's steel" always inspires.

"What coolness, what courage!" continued Lecoq "Ah! there is no denying it, his system of defence—of absolute denial—is a *chef d'œuvre*. It is perfect. And how admirably he sustained the different *role* of buffoon! Sometimes I could scarcely restrain my admiration. What are all these famous comedians beside him? The greatest actors need the aid of stage scenery to support the illusion. This man almost convinced me even against my reason."

"Do you know what your very just criticism proves?" inquired the judge.

"I am listening, monsieur."

"Ah, well! I have arrived at this conclusion—either this man is really May, artist—for the paying of compliments, as he says—or he belongs to the highest rank of society; not to the middle classes. It is only in the lowest ranks or in the highest, that you encounter such grim energy as he has displayed, such scorn of life, as well as such remarkable presence of mind and resolution. A vulgar bourgeois attracted to the Poivriere by some shameful passion would have confessed it long ago."

"But, monsieur, this man is not the buffoon, May," replied the young detective.

"No, certainly not," responded M. Segmuller; "we must, therefore, decide upon some plan of action."

He smiled kindly, and added, in a friendly voice:

"It was unnecessary to tell you that, Monsieur Lecoq. Quite unnecessary, since to you belongs the honor of having detected this fraud. As for me, I confess, that if I had not been warned in advance, I should at this moment be the dupe of this clever artist."

The young man bowed; a blush of modesty tinged his cheeks, but his pleased vanity sparkled in his eyes.

What a difference between this friendly and benevolent judge and that other, so taciturn and so haughty.

This man, at least, understood, appreciated, and encouraged him; and it was with a common theory and an equal ardor that they were about to devote themselves to a search for the truth.

These thoughts flitted through Lecoq's mind; then he reflected that his satisfaction was a trifle premature, and that success was still extremely doubtful.

This rather chilling thought restored his coolness.

"Monsieur, an idea has just occurred to me," he said, calmly.

"Let me hear it."

"The Widow Chupin, as you undoubtedly recollect, alluded to her son, a certain Polyte———"

"Yes."

"Why not question him? He must know all the habitues of the Poivriere, and would perhaps give us valuable information regarding Gustave, Lacheneur, and the murderer himself. As he is not in solitary confinement, he has probably heard of his mother's arrest; but it seems to me impossible that he should suspect our present perplexity.

"Ah! you are a hundred times right!" exclaimed the judge. "Why did I not think of that myself? To-morrow morning I will question this man, whose situation renders him less likely to have been tampered with than these parties. I will also question his wife."

He turned to his clerk and added:

"Quick, Goquet, prepare a summons in the name of the wife of Hippolyte Chupin, and address an order to the keeper of the depot for her husband!"

But night was coming on. It was already so dark that one could not see to write, and the clerk rang the bell and asked for a light. Just as the messenger who had brought in the lamps was leaving the room, some one rapped. The door opened, and the keeper of the prison entered with his hat in his hand.

During the past twenty-four hours this worthy officer had been greatly exercised in mind on account of the mysterious prisoner whom he had placed in secret cell No. 3, and he came to the judge for advice.

"I come to ask if I am to retain the prisoner, May, in solitary confinement?"

"Yes."

"I fear his attacks of frenzy, still I dislike to confine him in the strait-jacket again."

"Leave him free in his cell," replied M. Segmuller, "and tell the keepers to treat him kindly, but yet to exercise a constant surveillance over him."

By the provisions of Article 613, although accused parties are confided to the authority of the government, the judge is allowed, previous to the trial, to adopt such measures concerning them as he may deem necessary for the interests of the prosecution.

The keeper bowed; then he added:

"You have doubtless succeeded in establishing the identity of this prisoner?"

"Unfortunately, I have not."

The keeper shook his head with a knowing air.

"In that case, my conjectures were correct," said he. "It seems to me more than sufficiently demonstrated that this man is a malefactor of the worst sort—an old offender certainly, and one who has the strongest interest in concealing his identity. You will find that you have to deal with a man who has been sentenced to the galleys for life, and who has managed to make his escape from Cayenne."

"Perhaps you are mistaken."

"Hum! I shall be greatly surprised if I discover that I am. I must admit that my opinion in this matter corresponds exactly with that of M. Gevrol, the most experienced and the most skilful of our inspectors. I agree with him in thinking that young detectives are often over-zealous, and run after phantoms originated in their own brains."

Lecoq, crimson with wrath, was about to make an angry response, when M. Segmuller, with a gesture, imposed silence.

It was the judge who, with a smile, replied to the keeper.

"Upon my word, my dear friend," he said, "the more I study this affair, the more convinced I am of the correctness of the theory advanced by the 'too-zealous detective.' But, after all, I am not infallible, and I shall depend upon your counsel and assistance."

"Oh! I have means of verifying my assertion," interrupted the keeper; "and I hope before the end of the next twenty-four hours that our man will have been identified, either by the police or by some one of his fellow-prisoners."

With these words he took his leave, and Lecoq sprang up, furious.

"You see that this Gevrol already speaks ill of me; he is jealous."

"Ah, well! what does that matter to you? If you succeed, you will have your revenge. If you are mistaken—I am mistaken, too."

And then, as it was already late, M. Segmuller confided to Lecoq's keeping the articles which the latter had accumulated in support of his theory. He also placed in his hands the diamond ear-ring, whose owner must be discovered, then the letter signed Lacheneur, which had been found in the pocket of the dead soldier.

He gave him several commissions, and, after requesting him to make his appearance promptly on the morrow, he dismissed him with these words:

"Now go; and good luck attend you!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

Long, narrow, low of ceiling, and pierced by many small, numbered doors, like the corridor of a hotel, its sole furniture an immense oaken desk, blackened by age—such is the *galerie d'instruction* in the Palais de Justice.

Even in the day-time, when it is thronged with prisoners, witnesses, and guards, it is a sad and gloomy place.

But it is sinister of aspect at night, when deserted, and only dimly lighted by the smoking lamp of the door-keeper, who is waiting for the departure of some judge whom business has detained later than usual.

Although Lecoq was not sensitive to such influences, he made haste to reach the staircase and escape the echo of his own steps, which resounded drearily in the silence and darkness that pervaded the corridor.

On the floor below a window was standing open, and the young man leaned out to ascertain the state of the weather.

The temperature was much milder; the snow had disappeared entirely, and the pavements were almost dry. A slight haze, illumined by the red glare of the street lamps, hung like a purple mantle over the city.

The streets below were gay and animated; carriages were rolling rapidly to and fro, and the pavements were too narrow for the bustling crowd, which, now that the labors of the day were ended, was hastening in pursuit of its pleasures.

This spectacle drew a sigh from the young detective.

"And it is in this great city, in the midst of this world of people that I must discover the traces of an unknown person! Is it possible to do this?"

But this feeling of discouragement did not endure long.

"Yes, it is possible," cried an inward voice, "Besides, it *must* be done; your future depends upon it. What one wills, one can do."

Ten seconds later he was in the street, more than ever inflamed with hope and courage.

To act as the servants of boundless desires, man has, unfortunately, only organs of limited power. The young man had not advanced twenty steps before he realized the fact that his physical powers would not obey the command of his will. His limbs trembled; his head whirled. Nature asserted her rights; for two days and nights Lecoq had taken scarcely a moment's rest, and he had eaten nothing that day.

"Am I going to be ill?" he thought, sinking down upon a bench.

And he groaned inwardly, on recapitulating all that he wished to do that evening.

Must he not (to mention only the most important) ascertain the results of Father Absinthe's search after the man who had recognized one of the victims in the morgue; must he not verify in the hotels which surround the northern depot the assertions made by the prisoner; and last, but not least, must he not procure the address of Polyte Chupin's wife, in order to serve the summons upon her?

Under the power of urgent necessity, he succeeded in triumphing over his weakness, and he rose, murmuring:

"I will go to the prefecture, and to the morgue; then I will see."

But he did not find Father Absinthe at the prefecture, and no one could give any tidings of him. The good man had not made his appearance there at all during the day.

Nor could any one indicate, even vaguely, the abode of the Widow Chupin's daughter-in-law.

But he met a number of his colleagues, who laughed and jeered at him unmercifully.

"Ah! you are a shrewd one!"—all whom he met, said to him——"it seems that you have just made a wonderful discovery! They talk of decorating you with the cross."

Gevrol's influence betrayed itself everywhere. The angry inspector had taken pains to inform each new-comer that this poor Lecoq, crazed by ambition, persisted in declaring that a low, vulgar fugitive from justice was some great personage.

But these jeers had but little effect upon the young man. "He laughs best, who laughs last," he muttered.

If he was restless and anxious as he walked up the Quai des Orfevres, it was only because he could not explain the prolonged absence of Father Absinthe, and because he wondered if Gevrol, in his mad jealousy, would not attempt, in an underhand way, to entangle all the threads of this business still more.

At the morgue, he met with no better success. After ringing three or four times, one of the guard who came to open the door informed him that the bodies had not been identified, and that the old policeman had not been seen since he left there early in the morning.

"This is a bad beginning," thought Lecoq. "I will go and get some dinner—that will, perhaps, change the luck; and I have certainly earned the bottle of good wine to which I intend to treat myself."

It was a happy thought. Some dinner and a couple of glasses of Bordeaux sent new courage and energy coursing through his veins. If he still felt weary, the sensation was greatly diminished when he left the restaurant with a cigar between his lips.

Just at that moment he longed for the carriage and the good horse of Father Papillon. Fortunately, a *fiacre* was passing; he hired it, and as the clock struck eight he alighted at the square near the northern depot. He looked about a little first, then he began his search,

It must be understood that he did not present himself in his official capacity. That would be a sure way of learning nothing.

By brushing back his hair and turning up his coat collar, he made a very considerable alteration in his appearance; and it was with a very pronounced English accent that he asked information concerning a "foreign workman."

But vainly he employed all his address in questioning parties; everywhere he received the same response:

"We do not know such a person; we have not seen any one answering this description."

Any other reply would have astonished Lecoq, so strongly persuaded was he that the prisoner had only related this incident of a trunk left at one of these hotels in order to give a semblance of truth to his narrative.

Still he continued his investigation. If he noted upon his memorandum book all the hotels he had visited, it was only because he wished to make sure of the discomfiture of the prisoner when they brought him here to prove the truth of his story.

At last he reached the Hotel de Mariembourg, on the corner of the Rue de St. Quentin.

The house was modest in its proportions; but seemed respectable and well kept. Lecoq pushed open the glass doors, furnished with a spring bell, that opened into the vestibule, and entered the office—a neat room, brightly lighted.

There was a woman in the office. She was standing upon a chair, her face on a level with a large bird-cage, covered with a piece of black silk; and she was repeating three or four German words with

great earnestness to the occupant of the cage.

She was so engrossed in this occupation that Lecoq was obliged to make considerable noise before he could attract her attention.

As she turned, he said:

"Ah! good-evening, madame; you are much interested, I see, in teaching your parrot to talk."

"It is not a parrot that I have here," replied the woman, who had not yet descended from her perch; "it is a starling, I am trying to teach it to say in German: 'Have you breakfasted?' "

What! can starlings talk?"

"As well as persons. Yes, monsieur," said the woman, jumping down from her chair.

Just then the bird, as if it had understood the question, cried very distinctly:

"Camille! Where is Camille?"

But Lecoq was too anxious to bestow much attention upon the bird.

"Madame," he began, "I wish to speak to the proprietor of this hotel."

"I am the proprietor.

"Oh! very well. I was expecting a mechanic—from Leipsic, to meet me here in Paris. To my great surprise, he has not made his appearance; and I came to inquire if he was stopping here? His name is May."

"May!" repeated the hostess, thoughtfully. "May!"

"He ought to have arrived last Sunday evening."

The woman's face brightened.

"Wait a moment," said she. "Was this friend a middle-aged man, of medium size, of very dark complexion—wearing a full beard, and having very bright eyes?"

Lecoq trembled. This was a perfect description of the murderer.

"Yes," he stammered, "that is a very good portrait of the man."

"Ah, well! Monsieur, he came here on the afternoon of Shrove Sunday. He asked for a cheap room, and I showed him one on the fifth floor. The office-boy was not here at the time, and he insisted upon taking his trunk up stairs himself. I offered him some refreshments; but he declined to take anything, on account of his being in a great hurry; and he went away after giving me ten francs as security for his room-rent."

"Where is he?" inquired the young detective.

"*Mon Dieu!* monsieur, that reminds me," replied the woman. "This man has not returned, and I have been very anxious about him. Paris is such a dangerous place for strangers! It is true he spoke French as well as you or I; but what of that? Last evening I gave orders that the commissioner of police should be informed of the matter."

"Yesterday—the commissioner!"

"Yes. Still I do not know whether the boy did the errand. I had forgotten all about it. Allow me to ring for the boy, and ask him."

A bucket of ice water falling upon the head of the detective, could not have astonished him more than this announcement from the proprietress of the Hotel de Mariembourg.

Had the murderer indeed told the truth? Could it be possible? Gevrol and the keeper of the prison were right, then! And M. Segmuller and he, Lecoq, were senseless fools, pursuing a phantom.

All this flashed like lightning through the brain of the detective.

But he had no time for reflection. The boy who had been summoned made his appearance—a big, overgrown boy—with a frank, chubby face.

"Fritz," demanded his mistress, "did you go to the office of the commissioner?"

"Yes, madame."

"What did he say?"

"He was not in; but I spoke to his secretary, M. Casimir, who told me to tell you not to worry yourself. that the man would return."

"He has not returned."

The boy raised his arms, with that movement of the shoulders which is the most eloquent translation of that response:

"What would you have me do about it?"

"You hear, sir," said the hostess, apparently thinking the importunate questioner would withdraw.

Such, however, was not the intention of Lecoq, and he did not move, though he had need of all his self-possession to retain his English accent.

"This is very annoying," said he, "very! I am even more anxious and undecided than I was before, since I am not certain that this is the man I am seeking."

"But, sir, what more can I tell you?"

Lecoq reflected for a moment, knitting his brows and biting his lips, as if he were trying to invent some means of solving the mystery.

The fact is, he was seeking some adroit circumlocution by which he could propose that this woman should show him the register in which all guests are compelled to inscribe their full names, their profession, and their residence; but he feared to arouse her suspicions.

"But, madame, can you not remember the name which this man gave you? Was it May? Try to recollect if that was the name—May—May!"

"Ah! I have so many things to remember."

"It would be a great convenience if each guest were required to inscribe his

name in a register, as is the custom in England."

"But they do register," replied the woman. "I have a book for that purpose, in which a whole column is allotted to each guest. And now I think of it; I could, if it would oblige you, show you my book. It is there, in the drawer of my secretary. Well, now! what can I have done with my key?"

And while the hostess, who seemed to possess but little more intelligence than her bird, was turning the whole office upside down in her search for the key, Lecoq scrutinized her closely.

She was about forty years of age, with an abundance of light hair, and a very fair complexion. She was well preserved—that is to say—she was plump and healthy in appearance; her glance was frank and unembarrassed; her voice was clear and musical, and her manners were pleasing, and entirely free from affectation.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "I have found the miserable key at last."

She opened her desk, took out the register, which she laid upon the table, and began turning over the leaves.

At last she found the desired page.

"Sunday, February 20th," said she. "Look, monsieur: here on the seventh line—May—no Christian name—foreign artist—coming from Leipsic—without papers."

While Lecoq was examining this record with a dazed air, the woman exclaimed:

"Ah! now I can explain how it happened that I forgot this name—May, and this strange profession—foreign artist. I did not write it myself."

"Who did write it, then?"

"The man himself, while I was finding ten francs to give him as change for the louis he handed me. You can see that the writing is not at all like that in which the names above and below are recorded."

Yes, Lecoq had observed that fact; and it was an irrefutable argument, as sure and as strong as a blow from a cudgel.

"Are you sure," he insisted, "that this record is in the man's handwriting; Would you swear it?"

In his anxiety, he had forgotten his foreign accent. The woman noticed this at once, for she drew back and cast a suspicious glance at the pretended stranger. Then defiance and anger at having been duped seemed to take possession of her.

"I know what I am saying," she said, indignantly. "And now this is enough, is it not?"

Knowing that he had betrayed himself, and thoroughly ashamed of his lack of coolness, Lecoq renounced his English accent altogether.

"Pardon me," he said, "if I ask one more question. Have you this man's trunk in your possession?"

"Certainly."

"Ah! you would do me an immense service by showing it to me."

"Show it to you!" exclaimed the fair-haired hostess, angrily. "What do you take me for? What do you want? and who are you?"

"In a half hour you shall know," replied the detective, realizing that further persuasion would be useless.

He hastily left the room, ran to the Place de Robaux, leaped into a carriage, and giving the driver the address of the commissioner of police for that district, promised him a hundred sous over and above the regular fare if he would make haste. As might have been expected under such circumstances, the poor horses fairly flew under the stroke of the whip.

Lecoq was fortunate enough to find the commissioner at home. The detective made known his business, and was immediately ushered into the presence of the magistrate.

"Ah! sir," he cried, "will you assist me?"

And in a breath he told his story.

When it was concluded:

"It is really true that they came to inform me of this man's disappearance," said the judge. "Casimir told me about it this morning."

"They—came—to inform—you———" faltered Lecoq.

"Yes, yesterday; but I have had so much to occupy my time. Now, my boy, "how can I serve you?"

"Come with me, sir; compel them to show us the trunk, and send for a locksmith to open it. Here is the authority—a search warrant given me by the judge to use in case of necessity. Let us lose no time. I have a carriage at the door."

"We will start at once," said the commissioner.

When they had entered the *fiacre*, which started off at a gallop:

"Now, sir," said the young detective, "permit me to ask if you know this woman who keeps the Hotel de Mariembourg?"

"Yes, indeed, I know her very well. When I was first appointed to this district, six years ago, I was not married, and for a long time I took my meals at this lady's *table d'hote*. Casimir, my secretary, boards there yet."

"And what kind of a woman is she?"

"Why, upon my word, my young friend, Mme. Milner—for such is her name—is a very respectable widow (esteemed and much beloved in this neighborhood), who has a very prosperous business, and who remains a widow only

from choice, for she is extremely agreeable, and has plenty of suitors."

"Then you do not think her capable, for the sake of a good round sum, of—what shall I say?—of serving some very rich culprit———"

"Have you gone mad?" interrupted the commissioner. "Mme. Milner consent to testify falsely for the sake of money! Have I not just told you that she is an honest woman, and that she has a very comfortable fortune! Besides, she informed me yesterday that this man was missing, so———"

Lecoq made no reply; they had reached their destination.

On seeing her obstinate questioner reappear, accompanied by the commissioner, Mme. Milner seemed to understand it all.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she exclaimed, "a detective! I might have known it! Some crime has been committed; and now my hotel has lost its reputation forever!"

It took quite a long time to reassure and to console her; all the time that was required to find a locksmith.

At last they went up to the room of the missing man, and Lecoq sprang to the trunk.

Ah! there was no denying it. It had, indeed, come from Leipsic; the little slips of paper pasted upon it by the different railroad companies proved it.

They opened it and found the articles mentioned by the prisoner.

Lecoq was petrified. With an almost stupefied air he watched the commissioner as he locked everything up in a cupboard and took possession of the key; then he felt that he could endure no more. He left the room with downcast head; and they heard him stumble like a drunken man as he descended the stairs.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Mardi Gras, or Shrove Tuesday, was very gay that year; that is to say: the pawnbroker's shops and the public balls were crowded.

When Lecoq left the Hotel de Mariembourg about midnight, the streets were as full as if it were noon-day, and the *cafes* were thronged with customers.

But the young man had no heart for gayety. He mingled with the crowd without seeing it, and jostled groups of people chatting on the corners, without hearing the imprecations occasioned by his awkwardness.

Where was he going! He had no idea. He walked on aimlessly, more inconsolable and desperate than the gambler who has staked his last hope with his last *louis* and lost.

"I must yield," he murmured; "this evidence is conclusive. My presumptions were only chimeras; my deductions, the playthings of chance! There only remains for me now to withdraw, with the least possible damage and ridicule, from the false position I have assumed."

Just as he reached the boulevard, a new idea entered his brain, startling him so much that he could scarcely restrain a cry.

"I am a fool, he exclaimed, striking his hand violently against his forehead.

"Is it possible," he continued, "that I am so strong in theory, yet so ridiculously weak in practice. Ah! I am only a child, yet a novice, disheartened by the slightest obstacle. I meet some difficulty. I lose courage and even the power to reason.

"Now, let me reflect calmly.

"What did I tell the judge about this man, whose plan of defence so puzzles us?

"Did I not tell him that we had to deal with a man of superior talent—with a man of consummate penetration, and experience—a bold, courageous man, who possesses an imperturbable coolness, and who will do anything to ensure the success of his plans?

"Yes; I told him all this, and yet, I give up in despair as soon as I meet a single circumstance that I cannot explain at once.

"It is evident, then, that this prisoner would not be likely to resort to old and hackneyed methods, and commonplace expedients. Ought I not to expect that it would require time, patience, and research to find a flaw in his defence?

"Consequently, the more appearances are against my presumptions, and in favor of the story told by the prisoner, the more certain it is that I am right—or logic is no longer logic."

The young man burst into a hearty laugh, and added:

"But to expose this theory at headquarters before Gevrol would perhaps be premature, and would win me a certificate entitling me to admission into the lunatic asylum."

He paused; he had reached his lodgings. He rang the bell; some one opened the door.

He groped his way slowly up to the fourth floor; he reached his room, and was about to enter, when a voice in the darkness called out:

"Is that you, Monsieur Lecoq?"

"It is I," replied the young man, somewhat surprised; "but who are you?"

"I am Father Absinthe."

"Upon my word! Well, you are welcome! I did not recognize your voice—will you come in?"

They entered, and Lecoq lit a candle. Then the young man could see his col-

league, and, good heavens! what a condition he was in!

He was as dirty and spattered with mud as a lost dog which has been wandering about in the rain and mire for three or four days. His overcoat bore traces of frequent contact with damp walls; his hat had lost its form entirely. His eyes were anxious; his moustache drooped despondently. He mumbled his words as if his mouth were full of sand.

"Do you bring me bad news?" inquired Lecoq, after a short examination of his companion.

"Bad."

"The people you were following escaped you, then?"

The old man nodded his head in the affirmative.

"It is unfortunate—very unfortunate!" said Lecoq. "But it is useless to distress ourselves about it. Do not be so cast down, Father Absinthe. To-morrow, between us, we will repair the damages."

This friendly encouragement redoubled the old man's evident embarassment. He flushed, this veteran, like a school-girl, and raising his hands towards Heaven, he exclaimed:

"Ah, wretch! did I not tell you so?"

"Why! what is the matter with you?" inquired Lecoq.

Father Absinthe made no reply; he approached the mirror and began heaping the most cruel insults upon the reflection of his features therein.

"Old good-for-nothing!" he exclaimed. "Vile soldier! have you no shame left? You were entrusted with a mission, were you not? And how have you fulfilled it? You have drank, wretch, until you drank away your senses like an old sot, as you are. This shall not be passed over thus; and even if M. Lecoq forgives me, you shall not taste another drop for a week. You shall suffer for this escapade."

"Come, come," said Lecoq, "you can sermonize by and by. Now tell me your story."

"Ah! I am not proud of it. I beg you to believe that; but never mind. Doubtless you received the letter in which I told you that I was going to follow the young men who seemed to recognize Gustave?"

"Yes, yes—go on!"

"Well, as soon as they entered the *cafe*, into which I had followed them, the young men began drinking, probably to drive away their emotion. After drinking, hunger apparently seized them, for they ordered breakfast. In my corner I followed their example. The repast, the coffee and beer all took time. Two hours elapsed before they were ready to pay their bill and go. Good! I supposed they would now return to their homes—not at all. They walked down the Rue Dauphin; and I saw them enter a coffee-house or smoking-room. Five minutes later I glided in after them; they were already engaged in a game of billiards."

He hesitated; it was not easy to tell the rest of his story.

"I seated myself at a little table, and asked for a newspaper. I was reading with one eye, and watching them with the other, when a worthy bourgeois entered, and took a seat beside me. As soon as he had seated himself he asked me to give him the paper when I had finished reading it. I handed it to him, and then we began talking of the weather. At last he proposed a game of bezique. I declined, and we afterwards compromized on a game of piquet. The young men, you understand, were still knocking the balls about. We began playing, the stakes, a glass of brandy for each. I won. The bourgeois demanded his revenge, and we played two more games. Still I won. He insisted upon another game, and again I won, and still I drank—and drank again———"

"Go on, go on."

"Ah! here is the rub. After that I can remember nothing—neither of the bourgeois nor of the young men. It seems to me, however that I recollect falling asleep in the *cafe*, and a waiter coming to wake me and tell me to go. Then I must have wandered about on the quays until I came to my senses, and decided to come and wait upon your stairs until you returned."

To the great surprise of Father Absinthe, Lecoq seemed rather thoughtful than angry.

"What do you think about this bourgeois, papa?" inquired Lecoq.

"I think that he was following me while I was following the others, and that he entered the *cafe* with the intention of getting me intoxicated."

"Give me a description of him."

"He was a tall and rather stout man, with a broad, red face, a flat nose; and he was very unpretending and affable in manner."

"It was he!" exclaimed Lecoq.

"He! Who?"

"The accomplice—the man whose footprints we discovered—the pretended drunkard—a devil incarnate, who will get the best of us yet, if we do not keep our eyes open. Do not forget him, papa; and if you ever meet him again———"

But Father Absinthe's confession was not ended. Like most devotees, he had reserved the worst sin for the last.

"This is not all," he resumed; "and I wish to conceal nothing from you. It seems to me that this traitor talked with me about the affair at the Poivriere, and that I told him all that we had discovered, and all that we intended to do."

Lecoq made such a threatening gesture

that the old man drew back in consternation.

"Wretched man!" he exclaimed, "to betray our plans to the enemy!"

But he soon regained his calmness. At first the evil seemed to be beyond remedy; then he discovered that it had a good side, after all. It removed all the doubts he had felt after his visit to the Hotel de Mariembourg.

"But this is not the time for deliberation," resumed the young detective. "I am overcome with fatigue; take a mattress from the bed for yourself, my friend, and let us go to rest."

CHAPTER XXV.

LECOQ was a thoughtful man. Before going to bed he took good care to wind an alarm-clock that stood in his room, setting the alarm at six o'clock.

"So that we shall not miss the coach," he remarked to his companion, as he blew out the candle.

But he had not made allowance for his extreme weariness, and for the fumes of alcohol with which his friend's breath was redolent.

When the clock of Saint Eustache pealed forth the hour of six the alarm-clock performed its duty faithfully; but the shrill sound of the ingenious mechanism was not sufficiently loud to disturb the heavy sleep of the two men.

They would probably have slept some time longer, if, at half-past seven o'clock, two vigorous blows of the fist had not resounded on their door.

With one bound Lecoq was out of bed, amazed at seeing the bright sunlight, and furious at the uselessness of his precautions.

"Come in!" he cried to his early visitor.

The young detective had no enemies at that time, and he could, without danger, sleep with his door unlocked.

The door opened, and the shrewd face of Father Papillon appeared.

"Ah! it is my worthy coachman!" exclaimed Lecoq. "Is there anything new?"

"Excuse me, friend; it is the old cause that brings me here. You know—the thirty francs those wretched women paid me—I shall not sleep in peace till I have carried you free, until your regular fare would be equal to that amount. You made use of my carriage yesterday, one hundred sous' worth, and so I still owe you twenty-five francs worth of riding."

"This is all nonsense, my friend!"

"Possibly; but I am responsible for it. I have sworn if you will not use my carriage to station myself and my vehicle before your door for eleven hours. At two francs and twenty-five centimes an hour eleven hours would release me from my indebtedness. We should be even. Now, make up your mind."

He gazed at Lecoq beseechingly; it was evident that a refusal would wound him keenly.

"Very well," replied Lecoq; "I will take your carriage for the morning, only I ought to warn you that we are starting on a long journey."

"Cocotle's legs may be relied upon."

"My companion and myself have business in your quarter of the city. It is absolutely necessary for us to find the Widow Chupin's daughter-in-law; and I hope we shall be able to obtain her address from the commissioner of that district."

"Very well, we will go wherever you wish; I am at your orders."

A few moments later they were on their way.

Papillon, proudly erect upon his box, cracked his whip; and the vehicle tore along as rapidly as if the driver had been promised a hundred sous as *pour-boire*.

Father Absinthe alone, was sad. He had been forgiven, but he could not forgive himself that he, an old policeman, should have been duped like some ignorant provincial. If only he had not confided the secret plans of the prosecution! He knew but too well that by this act he had increased the difficulties of their task twofold.

Their long drive was not fruitless. The secretary of the commissioner of police for the thirteenth district informed Lecoq that the wife of Polyte Chupin, with her child, lived in the suburbs, in the Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles. He could not tell the precise number; but he described the house, and gave them some information concerning its occupants.

The Widow Chupin's daughter-in-law was a native of Auvergne; and she had been bitterly punished for preferring a Parisian to a compatriot.

She came to Paris when about twelve years of age, and obtained employment in a large factory. At the end of ten years of privation and constant toil, she had amassed, penny by penny, the sum of three thousand francs. Then her evil genius threw Polyte Chupin in her path.

She fell in love with this dissipated and selfish rascal; and he married her for her little hoard.

As long as the money lasted, that is, for about three or four months, everything went on pleasantly. But as soon as the last shilling was gone, Polyte left her, and, with delight, resumed his former life of idleness, thieving, and debauchery.

After this he returned to his wife, only in order to steal from her, when he suspected that she had saved a little money.

And, periodically, she uncomplainingly allowed him to despoil her of the last penny of her earnings.

He wished to degrade her still more, for he hungered even for the price of her shame; but she resisted.

By this resistance, she had excited the hatred of the old Widow Chupin—hatred which manifested itself in such ill-treatment that the poor woman was forced to flee one night, with only the rags that covered her.

The mother and the son believed, perhaps, that starvation would effect what their threats and counsel had failed to accomplish.

Their shameful expectations had not been gratified.

The secretary added that these facts had become widely known, and that everybody did justice to the worth of the brave woman.

Hence the sobriquet which had been given her—Toinon, the virtuous—a rather coarse, but sincere tribute to her worth.

Grateful for this information, Lecoq reentered the carriage.

The Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles, to which Papillon was rapidly conducting them, did not bear much resemblance to the Boulevard Maxelherbes. Was it the abode of millionaires? One would not suppose it. One thing is certain, however: all the inhabitants knew one another as they do in a village, and the first person of whom Lecoq asked information concerning Madame Polyte Chupin, relieved him of all embarassment.

"Toinon, the virtuous, lives in that house on the right," was the answer; "on the upper floor, the door facing you."

The directions were so precise that Lecoq and Father Absinthe went straight to the room they were seeking.

It was a cold and gloomy attic room, of medium size, and lighted by a small skylight.

A pallet of straw, a broken table, two chairs, and a few plain kitchen utensils, formed the sole furniture of the apartment.

But, in spite of the evident poverty, everything shone with neatness; and one could have eaten off the floor, to use Father Absinthe's forcible expression.

The two officers entered, and found a woman engaged in making heavy linen sacks. She was seated in the centre of the room, directly under the window, so that the light would fall upon her work.

At the sight of two strangers, she half rose, surprised, and perhaps a little frightened; but when they explained that they desired a few moments conversation with her, she gave up her own seat, to offer it to them.

But Father Absinthe insisted that she should sit down again, and he remained standing, while Lecoq took possession of the other chair.

In a single glance Lecoq took an inventory of the humble abode, and, so to speak, appraised the woman.

She was short, stout, and extremely ordinary in appearance. A forest of coarse, black hair, growing very low on the forehead, and large black eyes set very close together, imparted to her countenance something of the patient resignation one sees in the faces of ill-treated animals.

Possibly, in former days, she had possessed what we called the beauty *du diable;* but now she looked almost as old as her mother-in-law.

Sorrow and privation, excessive toil, nights spent in labor, tears and the blows she had received, had made her complexion livid—had reddened her eyes and made deep furrows about her temples.

Still her whole person exhaled a perfume of native honesty which had not been tainted, even by the foul atmosphere in which she had lived.

Her child did not resemble her in the least. He was pale, and puny in appearance; his eyes burned with a phosphorescent brilliancy; and his hair was of that faded yellow tint that they call blonde in Paris.

One little circumstance attracted the attention of both officers.

The mother was attired in a very old and faded calico dress; but the child was warmly clad in warm woolen material.

"Madame, you have doubtless heard of a great crime, committed in your mother-in-law's establishment." began Lecoq, gently.

"Alas! yes, monsieur."

Then she quickly added:

"But my husband could not have been implicated in it, since he is in prison."

Did not this objection, which preceded suspicion, betray the most horrible apprehensions?

"Yes, I am aware of that," replied her visitor. "Polyte was arrested a fortnight ago———"

"Yes, and very unjustly, monsieur. I could swear it. He was, as is often the case, led astray by his companions, wicked, desperate men. He is so weak when he has taken a glass of wine, they can do whatsoever they will with him. If he were only left to himself, he would not harm a child. One has only to look at him———"

As she spoke she turned her red and swollen eyes to a miserable photograph hanging upon the wall. The picture represented a frightfully ugly, dissipated looking young man, with a terrible squint, a repulsive mouth, only partially concealed by a faint moustache, and his hair carefully plastered down about the temples. This was Polyte.

Yet there was no mistaking the fact that this unfortunate woman loved him—had always loved him; besides, he was her husband.

A moment's silence followed this act, which revealed the existence of passion so clearly; and during this silence the door of the room was opened softly.

A man put in his head and withdrew it instantly, with a low exclamation. Then the door closed again, the key grated in the lock, and they heard hurried steps descending the staircase.

Lecoq was sitting with his back to the door, and could not see the face of the visitor.

And yet he had turned so quickly at the sound, and he understood the whole affair so well that he was not surprised at all.

Indeed, he did not feel the shadow of a doubt.

"It is he, the accomplice!" he cried.

Thanks to his position, Father Absinthe had seen the man's face.

"Yes," said he, "yes, I recognize the man who made me drink with him yesterday."

With a bound the two men threw themselves against the door, exhausting their strength in vain efforts to open it. It resisted all their attempts, for it was of solid oak, having been purchased by the proprietor of the house from some one of the public buildings in process of demolition, and it was furnished with a strong and massive fastening.

"Help us!" cried Father Absinthe to the woman, who stood petrified with astonishment; "give us an iron bar, a piece of iron, a nail—anything!"

The younger man was making frantic efforts to push back the bolt, or to tear the lock from the wood. He was wild with rage.

At last they succeeded in forcing it open, and the two men, animated by an equal ardor, dashed out in pursuit of their mysterious adversary.

When they reached the street, they made inquiries of the bystanders. They could give a description of the man, and that was something Two persons had seen him enter the house of Toinon, the virtuous; a third had seen him when he ran out. Some children who were playing on the street assured them that this individual had run in the direction of the Rue du Moulin-des-Pres as fast as his legs could carry him.

It was in this street, near the corner of the Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles, that Lecoq had ordered his coachman to stop.

"Let us hasten there!" proposed Father Absinthe; "perhaps Papillon can give us some information."

But his companion shook his head despondently, and would go no further.

"What good would it do?" he asked. "The presence of mind that made this man think to turn the key, has saved him. He is at least ten minutes in advance of us; by this time he is far away, and we should not overtake him."

Father Absinthe was livid with anger. He now regarded as a personal enemy this adroit accomplice who had so cruelly duped him; and he would have given a month's pay to be able to lay his hand on the man's collar.

"Ah!" this brigand does not lack assurance," said he. "To think how he defies and mocks us; and how for the third time he has escaped us. Three times!"

The young detective was at least as angry as his companion—and his vanity was wounded besides; but he felt the necessity of coolness and deliberation.

"Yes," he replied, thoughtfully, "the man is daring and shrewd; and he does not sit down with folded arms. If we are working, he also is bestirring himself. The demon is everywhere. On whichever side I make an attack, I find him on the defensive. It was he, my friend, who made you lose the clue to Gustave's identity: it was he who arranged that little comedy at the Hotel de Mariembourg."

"And now remarked his companion, "now let the General come and tell us that we are chasing phantoms."

This flattery, delicate as it was, did not divert Lecoq's attention from the matter under consideration.

"Until now, this man has been in advance of us everywhere; this fact explains the failures that have attended all my efforts. Here, we arrived before him But if he came here, it was because he scented danger. Therefore, we may hope. Let us return to the wife of this rascal, Polyte."

Alas! poor Toinon, the virtuous, did not understand this affair. She had remained up-stairs, holding her child by the hand, and leaning over the bannister, her eyes and her ears on the *qui vive*.

As soon as she perceived the two men leisurely ascending the stairs, she came to meet them.

"In the name of Heaven, what does all this mean?" she exclaimed. "What has happened?"

But Lecoq was not the man to tell his affairs in a corridor, tapestried, perhaps, with listening and curious ears, and it was not until he had made Toinon enter her own apartment and close the door securely, that he answered her.

"We started in pursuit of an accomplice to the murders at the Poivriere. He came in, hoping to find you alone, but our presence frightened him."

"An assassin!" faltered Toinon, with clasped hands. "What could he want of me?"

"Who can say? It is very probable that he is one of your husband's friends."

"Oh! monsieur."

"What, did you not tell me just now that Polyte had some very undesirable acquaintance? But do not be alarmed; this does not compromise him in the least. Besides, you can very easily clear him of all suspicion."

"How? In what way? Oh, tell me at at once."

"Merely by answering me frankly, and by assisting me—you, who are an honest woman—to find the guilty party. Among all the friends of your husband, do you know of none capable of such a deed? Give me the names of his acquaintances."

The poor woman's hesitation was evident; undoubtedly she had been present at many sinister cabals, and had been threatened with terrible punishment if she dared to disclose their plans.

"You have nothing to fear," said Lecoq, encouragingly, "and never, I promise you, shall any one know that you have told me a word. And very probably you can tell me nothing that I do not know now. I have heard much of your life already, to say nothing of the brutality with which you have been treated by Polyte and his mother."

"My husband, sir, has never treated me brutally," said the young woman, indignantly; "besides, that is something which concerns only myself."

"And your mother-in-law?"

"She is, perhaps, a trifle quick-tempered; but in reality, she has a very good heart."

"Then why did you flee from the Widow Chupin's house, if you were so very happy there?"

Toinon, the virtuous, turned scarlet to the very roots of her hair.

"I left there for other reasons," she responded. "There were always a great many intoxicated men about the house; and, sometimes, when I was alone, some of them wished to carry their pleasantry too far You will probably say that I have a very solid fist, and that I am quite capable of protecting myself. That is true, so I could, perhaps have borne it. But when I was away, some of them were wicked enough to make this child drink to such an excess that on my return I found him as stiff and cold as if he were dead. It was necessary to call a physician to restore him———"

She suddenly paused; her eyes dilated. From red she turned livid, and in a choked, unnatural voice, she cried:

"Toto! wretched child!"

Lecoq looked behind him, and shuddered. He understood it all. This child who was not yet five years old, had stolen up behind him, and was ferreting in the pockets of his overcoat, had plundered them, had rifled them of their contents.

"Ah, well—yes!" exclaimed the unfortunate mother, bursting into tears. "It way always so over there. As soon as the child was out of my sight, they took him to the city. They carried him into the crowded streets, and they taught him to pick people's pockets, and to bring them all he could find. If he was detected they were angry with the child, and beat him. If he succeeded they gave him a sou to buy candy, and kept what he had taken."

She hid her face in her hands, and in an almost unintelligible voice she sobbed.

"And I did not wish my little one to be a thief!"

But what this poor creature did not tell was that he who had led the child out into the streets, to teach him to steal, was its own father, and her husband, Polyte Chupin. But the two men understood this perfectly; and so horrible was the man's crime, and so despairing the grief of the woman, that they were touched in the very depths of their souls.

After that, Lecoq's only thought was to shorten the painful scene as much as possible. Besides, the poor mother's emotion was a sufficient guarrantee of her sincerity.

"Listen," said he, with affected harshness; two questions only, and then I will leave you. Among the habitues of the establishment was there a man by the name of Gustave?"

"No, sir; I am very sure there was not."

"Very well. But Lacheneur—you must know Lacheneur!"

"Yes, sir; I know him."

The young policeman could not repress an exclamation of delight. He thought that he at last held an end of the thread that would lead him to the light—to the truth.

"Who is this man?" he inquired, with intense anxiety.

"Oh! he is not at all like the other men who come to drink at my mother-in-law's saloon. I have seen him only once; but I remember him perfectly. It was on Sunday. He was in a carriage. He stopped near the unoccupied ground and spoke to Polyte. When he went away my husband said to me: 'Do you see that old man there? he will make our fortune.' I thought him a very respectable looking gentleman———"

"That is enough," interrupted Lecoq. "Now it is necessary for you to appear before the judge and make your deposition. I have a carriage below Take your child with you, if you wish; but make haste; come quickly—come!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

M. SEGMULLER was one of those magistrates who cherish their profession with an undivided love, who give themselves to it, body and soul, devoting to it all the energy, intelligence and sagacity of which they are possessed.

As a judge, he displayed, in the search after truth, the tenacity and zeal of a physician struggling against some unknown disease—the enthusiasm of the artist who is wearing out his very life in his devotion to the beautiful.

Hence, it is easy to understand how deeply he had become interested in this mysterious case which had been confided to him.

He found in it all the elements that cannot fail to awaken intense interest. The magnitude of the crime, the peculiar circumstances attending it, the impenetrable mystery that enshrouded the victims and the murderer, the strange attitude assumed by the prisoner, all served to make a profound impression upon his mind.

The romantic element was not lacking, furnished by the two women, all traces of whom had been lost.

The extreme uncertainty of the result was another attraction. Self-love never loses its rights; and M. Segmuller felt that success would be honorable in proportion to the magnitude of the difficulties to be overcome. And assisted by such a man as Lecoq, in whom he had recognized a most valuable auxiliary, and a man with a positive genius for his calling, he felt quite confident of success.

Even after the fatiguing labors of the day he did not think of freeing himself from the burden of his responsibility, or of driving away care until the morrow.

He ate his dinner hurriedly, and as soon as he had swallowed his coffee began to study the case with renewed ardor.

He had brought with him from his office a copy of the prisoner's deposition; and he went over it again and again, seeking some weak spot that might be attacked with a probability of success.

He analyzed each answer, and weighed one expression after another. He sought some flaw in the armor through which he could slip a question, which would rend the whole structure of defence in pieces, like a train of gunpowder.

The greater part of the night was spent in this work; but that did not prevent him from rising long before his usual hour.

By eight o'clock he was dressed, and shaved, had arranged his papers, taken his cup of chocolate, and was on his way to the palace.

He quite forgot that the impatience, which possessed him, was not boiling in the veins of others. But he soon discovered that fact.

The Palais de Justice was scarcely awake when he arrived there. All the doors had not been opened. In the corridors some of the door-keepers and a crowd of sleepy office-boys were changing their ordinary clothing for their official costumes.

Others, in their shirt-sleeves, were vigorously sweeping, and dusting the various rooms. Others were standing at the windows of the dressing-room shaking and brushing the long black robes of the lawyers. In the court room some clerks were chaffing each other, while they awaited the coming of the chief clerk, and the opening of the bureaux of information.

M. Segmuller went to consult the attorney general; or the *procureur imperial*, as he is called in France, but his office was empty. No one had, as yet, arrived.

Angry and impatient, he returned to his own office; and with his eyes fastened upon the pendulum, caught himself wondering at the slowness of its movements.

About ten minutes past nine, Goquet, the smiling clerk, made his appearance, and was greeted with a gruff. "Well! so you have come at last," that left him in no doubt as to the state of his master's humor.

Yet Goquet had come much earlier than usual, for his movements also had been quickened by curiosity.

He tried to make some excuse; but M. Segmuller cut it short, with such a curt response, that he felt no desire to continue the conversation. "Ah!" he thought, "it is very evident that the wind is blowing from a bad corner this morning."

And so, bowing before the storm, he philosophically put on his black silk sleeves, went to his little table, and pretended to be absorbed in the task of cutting his pens and preparing his paper.

But although he dared not show it he was very much vexed. For the evening before, while conversing with his wife, he had gained some new ideas in regard to the mysterious prisoner; and he was eager to impart them to the judge.

But no favorable opportunity presented itself. M. Segmuller, who was usually calmness personified, and dignity *par excellence*, was transformed. He paced restlessly to and fro, he sat down, he sprang up, he gesticulated wildly, and seemed unable to be quiet for a moment.

"The prosecution is evidently making no headway," thought the clerk. "May's prospects are encouraging."

At that moment this idea delighted him; he sided with the prisoner, his rancor was so intense.

From half-past nine to ten o'clock M.

Segmuller rang for his messenger at least five times, and each time he asked him the same questions.

"Are you sure that M. Lecoq has not been here this morning? Inquire! If he has not been here he must certainly have sent some one, or he must have written me."

Each time the astonished door-keeper replied

"No one has been here, and there is no letter."

The judge became more and more angry and impatient.

"It is inconceivable!" he murmured. "Here I am upon coals of fire, and that man dares to keep me waiting. Where can he be?"

At last he ordered a messenger to go and see if he could not find Lecoq somewhere in the neighborhood; perhaps in some restaurant or coffee-house; told him to go and find him and bring him there quickly, very quickly.

When the man had gone, M. Segmuller seemed to recover his composure, in a slight degree, at least.

"We must not lose valuable time," he said to his clerk. "I was to examine the Widow Chupin's son. I had better do so immediately. Go and tell them to bring him to me. Lecoq left the order at the prison."

In less than a quarter of an hour Polyte entered the room.

From head to foot, from his glazed cap to his gaudy-colored carpet slippers, he was indeed the man of the portrait upon which poor Toinon, the virtuous, had lavished such loving glances.

But the picture was flattered. The photographer could not fix the expression of low cunning that was imprinted upon the face of the original, nor the impudence that breathed in his smile, nor the mingled cowardice and ferocity of his eyes, which always evaded you. Nor could the picture portray the unwholesome, livid pallor of his skin, the restless opening and shutting of the eyelids, and the thin lips tightly drawn over the short, sharp teeth.

It would be difficult for him to astonish those who saw him by any act of violence.

For to see him, was to judge and to estimate his worth.

When he had answered the preliminary questions, told the judge that he was thirty years of age, and that he had been born in Paris, he assumed a pretentious attitude and waited.

But before proceeding to the real matter in hand, M. Segmuller wished to relieve the complacent scoundrel of some of his assurance.

He reminded Polyte, in very forcible terms, that the judgment to be rendered in the affair in which he was implicated would depend very much upon his behavior and his responses during the present examination.

Polyte listened with a nonchalant and even ironical air.

In fact, he cared only the merest trifle for the threat. He had made previous inquiries and had ascertained that it would be impossible to condemn him to more than six months' imprisonment for the offence for which he had been arrested; and what did a month more or less matter to him?

The judge, who read this feeling in Polyte's eyes, cut his discourse short.

"Justice now demands some information from you concerning the *habitues* of your mother's establishment."

"There are a great many of them, m'sieur," responded Polyte, in a coarse, harsh voice.

"Do you know one among them by the name of Gustave?"

"No, m'sieur."

To insist would probably awaken suspicion in Polyte's mind, if he was really speaking the truth; so M. Segmuller continued:

"You must, however, remember Lacheneur?"

"Lacheneur? It is the first time I have ever heard that name."

"Take care. The police have means of finding out a great many things."

The scapegrace did not flinch.

"I am telling the truth, m'sieur," he insisted. "What interest could I possibly have in deceiving you?"

The door opened suddenly, and Toinon, his wife, entered with her child in her arms.

On seeing her husband, the poor woman uttered a cry of joy, and sprang towards him. But Polyte, stepping back, bestowed upon her a terrible glance that rooted her to the spot.

"It must be my enemy who pretends that I know any one named Lacheneur! I would like to kill the person who uttered such a falsehood. Yes; kill the person—and I will never forgive it."

CHAPTER XXVII.

HAVING received orders to go in search of Lecoq and to bring him back, if he succeeded in finding him, M. Segmuller's messenger had started on his errand.

The commission was not at all disagreeable to him; it afforded him an excuse for quitting his post, and also a very pleasant little stroll through the neighborhood.

He went to the prefecture first, by the longest way, however; but on arriving there, he could find no one who had seen the young detective.

He then strolled leisurely through the restaurants and through the drinking saloons in the vicinity of the Palais de Justice, and living through its patronage.

Being a conscientious commissioner, he entered each of these establishments, and having recognized several acquaintances, he felt compelled to proffer and to accept certain courtesies at the rate of fifty centimes per glass. But no Lecoq.

He was returning in haste, a trifle uneasy on account of the length of his absence, when a carriage stopped before the gateway of the palace.

He looked up, and—oh, happiness! from this carriage he saw Lecoq descend, followed by Father Absinthe and the Widow Chupin's daughter-in-law.

His serenity of mind was instantly restored; and it was in a very important tone that he delivered the order for Lecoq to follow him without losing a minute.

"Monsieur has asked for you a number of times," said he. "He has been extremely impatient, and he is in very bad humor; and you may expect to have your head snapped off in the most expeditious manner."

Lecoq smiled as he ascended the staircase. Was he not bringing with him the most potent of justifications! He was thinking of the agreeable surprise he had in store for the judge, and he seemed to see the sudden brightening of that functionary's gloomy face.

And yet the message delivered by the door-keeper, and his urgent appeal that Lecoq should not loiter by the way, was fated to produce the most unfortunate results.

Expected, as he supposed, and urged not to delay, Lecoq saw nothing wrong in opening the door of M. Segmuller's office without knocking, and he obeyed the fatal impulse that impelled him to enter in advance of the poor woman whose testimony might be so decisive.

Stupefaction seized him and held him motionless when he saw that the judge was not alone, and when he recognized, in this witness, whom M. Segmuller was examining, the original of the portrait, Polyte Chupin.

Instantly he comprehended his mistake, and its consequences. He did his best to prevent any communication, any interchange of thought between the husband and wife.

He sprang towards Toinon, and catching her rudely by the arm, he ordered her to leave the room on the instant.

"You cannot remain here," he cried, "come, go!"

But the poor creature was entirely overcome, and trembled like a leaf. She could see and hear nothing except her husband. To behold again this man whom she adored, what happiness! But why did he recoil from her? Why did he cast such withering glances upon her?

She tried to speak, to explain; but while she stood there frightened and bewildered, Polyte's harsh condemnation pierced her brain like a rifle ball.

Seeing this, Lecoq seized her about the waist, and lifting her as he would a feather, he carried her out into the corridor.

The whole scene had not lasted more than a moment, and M. Segmuller was still engaged in framing the order, when he found that the door was already closed, and that he was again alone with Polyte.

"Ah, ha!" thought Goquet, in a flutter of delight, "here is something new."

But as these little diversions never made him forget his duties as a clerk, he leaned towards the judge to ask:

"Must I take down the last words that were uttered by the witness?"

"Certainly," responded M. Segmuller, "and word for word, if you please."

He paused; the door opened again, to admit the door-keeper, who timidly, and with a rather guilty air, brought in a note, and again withdrew.

This note, scribbled in pencil by Lecoq upon a leaf torn from his memorandum book, told the judge the name of the woman who had just entered his room, and told briefly, but clearly, the information that had just been obtained.

"That boy thinks of everything!" murmured M. Segmuller.

The meaning of the scene that had taken place before his eyes a moment previous was now evident.

He understood the whole.

He regretted most bitterly this unfortunate meeting. But whom ought he to blame for it? Himself—himself alone; his impatience, his lack of caution, which, as soon as his messenger had departed, had induced him to summon Polyte Chupin.

While he could not doubt the enormous influence of this trifling circumstance, he would not allow himself to be alarmed by it, and continued his task of endeavoring to elicit some information from the sorry specimen before him.

"Let us go on," he said to Polyte.

The scapegrace gave a careless sign of assent. Since his wife had been taken from the room he had not moved, and was apparently sublimely indifferent to all that was passing around him.

"Was that your wife who came in just now?" demanded M. Segmuller.

"Yes."

"She wished to embrace you, and you repulsed her."

"I did not repulse her, m'sieur."

"You kept her at a distance; if you had any affection, you would at least, have given a look to your child, which she held out to you. Why was it?"

"It was not a time for sentiment."

"You are not telling the truth. You simply desired to attract her attention while you dictated her deposition."

"I—I dictate her deposition! I do not understand you, m'sieur."

"Were it not for this supposition, the words you uttered would be unintelligible."

"What words?"

The judge turned to his clerk:

"Goquet," said he, "read the last remark you took down, to the witness."

The clerk, in a monotonous voice, read:

"I would like to kill the person who dared to say that I knew Lacheneur."

"*Eh bien!*" insisted M. Segmuller, "what do you mean by that?"

"It is very easy to understand, m'sieur."

M. Segmuller rose.

"Enough of this prevaricating! You certainly ordered your wife to keep silence; that fact is evident. Why should you have done this? and what can she tell us? Do you suppose that the police are ignorant of your relations with Lacheneur—of your conversation with him when he, in a carriage, and in an unfrequented spot, awaited your coming—of the hopes of fortune which you based upon him? Be guided by me; decide to confess all, while there is yet time; do not pursue a course which may lead you into serious danger. One can be an accomplice in more ways than one."

It is certain that Polyte's impudence and indifference had received a very severe shock. He seemed confounded, and hung his head, muttering some unintelligible response.

Still, he preserved an obstinate silence; and the judge, who had just employed his strongest argument, and in vain, gave up in despair. He rang the bell, and ordered the guard to conduct the witness back to prison; and to take every precaution to prevent him from seeing his wife again.

When Polyte had departed, Lecoq reappeared. He was in despair.

"To think," he repeated again and again, "that I did not draw from this woman all that she knew, when it could have been done so easily. But I thought that you would be waiting for me, monsieur, so I made haste to bring her here. I thought I was acting for the best——"

"Never mind, the misfortune can be repaired."

"No, monsieur, no; we shall learn nothing more from this poor woman. It is impossible to extort a single word from her since she has seen her husband. She loves him, with a blind and foolish adoration; and he has an all-powerful influence over her. He has ordered her to be silent, and she will be silent 'even unto death'"

The young man's fears were well grounded. M. Segmuller saw this only too well, the instant Toinon, the virtuous, again set foot in his office.

The poor creature seemed nearly heart-broken. It was evident that she would have given her life to retract the words which had escaped her in her attic. Polyte's look had made her turn cold with horror, and had aroused the most sinister apprehensions in her mind. Not understanding his connection with the affair, she asked herself if her testimony would not be a death-warrant for him.

So she refused to make any response other than "no," or "I do not know," to questions; and all that she had previously said, she retracted. She swore that she was mistaken, that she had been misunderstood, that her words had been misrepresented. She declared upon the most sacred oaths, that she had never before heard the name of Lacheneur.

At last, when they pressed their questions too closely, she burst into wild, despairing sobs, pressing her weeping child convulsively to her breast.

What could one do against this foolish obstinacy, which was as unreasoning and blind as that of a brute? M. Segmuller hesitated. Finally, after a moment's reflection:

"You may retire, my good woman," he said, kindly; "but remember that your strange silence injures your husband more than anything you could say."

She left the room—or rather she rushed wildly away—and the judge and the detective exchanged glances of dismay and consternation.

"I said so before," thought Goquet; "the prisoner understands what he is about. I would be willing to bet a hundred to one on the prisoner."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

In a single word Delamorte Felines has defined prosecution. A "struggle," he terms it; and it is, in reality, a terrible struggle between justice, seeking after the truth, and crime, endeavoring to conceal it.

The judge of instruction, as he is called in France, is invested with discretionary powers, and is responsible only to the law and to his own conscience.

No one can hamper him, no one can give him orders. Administration, police, armed force, are all at his disposal. At a word from him twenty agents, or a hundred, if need be, search Paris, ransack France, or explore Europe.

If he suppose that any person can throw light upon an obscure point, he

orders that man to appear in his office; and he must come, if he live a hundred leagues away. Such is the position.

Isolated behind the bars, and probably in the solitary cell, the man accused of a crime is, as it were, cut off from the number of the living. No news from without reaches him in the cell, where he lives beneath the eye of his keeper. Of what is said, of what is passing outside these walls, he knows nothing. What witnesses have been examined, and what they have said, he knows not; and, in his doubt and uncertainty, he again and again asks himself to what extent he has been compromised, what proofs have been collected against him, and what grave charges are ready to crush him.

Such is the position of the prisoner. And yet, in spite of the fact that the two adversaries are so unequally armed, the man in the solitary cell not unfrequently conquers.

If he is sure that he has left behind him no proofs of his crime, if he has no antecedents to rise up against him, he can, impregnable in a defence of absolute denial, brave all the attacks of justice.

Such was, at this moment, the situation of May, the mysterious murderer.

M. Segmuller and Lecoq with mingled sorrow and anger were forced to admit this.

They had hoped that Polyte Chupin or his wife would give them the solution of this vexed problem—this hope had been disappointed.

And the identity of the prisoner remained as problematical as ever.

"And yet," exclaimed the judge vehemently, "and yet these people know something about this matter, and if they would——"

"They will not."

"Why, what motive influences them? This is what is necessary to discover. Who will tell us by what dazzling promises the silence of a scoundrel like this Polyte Chupin has been purchased? Upon what recompense does he count, since he is willing to brave real danger by this silence?"

Lecoq did not reply, but his knit brows showed that his thoughts were busy.

"There is one question which puzzles me more than anything else, and if it could be answered we should have made a long step in advance," he finally remarked.

"What is it?"

"You ask, monsieur, what reward has been promised to Chupin. I ask who it is that has promised him this reward?"

"Who has promised it? Evidently the accomplice who has beaten us on every point."

At this homage to the skill and audacity of his opponent, the young detective clenched his hands, and vowed vengeance against the man who had made him a prisoner, only an hour before.

"Certainly," he replied. "I recognize his hand in this. And now, what artifice has he used? We understand the method by which he succeeded in gaining an interview with the Widow Chupin. But how has he succeeded in reaching Polyte, who is a prisoner, and closely guarded?"

He did not utter his whole thought, but M. Segmuller understood him, and seemed intensely surprised, and even a trifle indignant, at the young man's suspicions.

"What can you mean?" said he. "You cannot suppose that one of the employes has been corrupted?"

Lecoq shook his head, with a rather equivocal air.

"I mean nothing," he replied; "I suspect no one. I am merely in pursuit of information. Has Chupin been warned—yes or no?"

"Yes, of course."

"That fact is admitted then. So I presume we must explain it by supposing either that there are informers in the prison, or that Chupin has been allowed to see some visitor."

M. Segmuller was evidently disturbed. He seemed to be hesitating between two opinions; then, suddenly making up his mind, he rose, took his hat, and said:

"I wish to have this matter cleared up. Come, Monsieur Lecoq."

In two minutes (thanks to the dark and narrow passage that connects the depot with the Palais de Justice) they entered the jail.

Rations had just been served to the prisoners, and the head keeper, who had been engaged in superintending the distribution, was now promenading in the court-yard with Gevrol.

As soon as he saw the judge, he approached him with great deference of manner.

"Undoubtedly, sir, you have come about the prisoner, May?"

"Yes."

Since it was a question of a prisoner, Gevrol thought he might approach without impropriety.

"I was just now talking to Inspector Gevrol about the prisoner," pursued the keeper, "and I was telling him that I had good reason to be satisfied with this man's conduct. It not only has been quite unnecessary to place him in the strait-jacket, but his mood seems to have changed entirely. He has a good appetite; he is as gay as a lark, and laughs and jests with his keeper."

The judge and Lecoq exchanged troubled glances.

This gayety might be assumed for the purpose of carrying out his *role* as a jester and buffoon; but might it not have come from a certainty of defeating his

opponents? or, who knows? perhaps, from some favorable news received from without.

This last supposition offered itself so persistently to M. Segmuller's mind, that he trembled.

"Are you sure," he inquired, "that no communication from outside can reach the inmates of the solitary cells?"

The worthy keeper seemed to be deeply wounded by the implied doubt. His subordinates suspected!—perhaps the keeper himself! He could not help lifting his hands to Heaven in mute protest against such injustice.

"Am I sure?" he exclaimed. "Then you have never visited the solitary cells—or the secret cells, as we call them. You have no idea, then, of the precautions that surround them, the triple bolts, the grating that shuts out the sunlight, to say nothing of the guard who walks beneath the windows night and day. Not even a bird could reach the prisoners in those cells."

Such a description could not fail to reassure the most sceptical.

"Now that I am easy on that score," said the judge, "I would like some information regarding another prisoner—a certain Chupin."

"Ah! I know—a vile scoundrel!"

"He is, indeed. I would like to know if he received any visitor yesterday?"

"It will be necessary for me to inquire of the clerk before I can answer with certainty. Wait a moment; here is a man who, perhaps, can inform us. He is on guard at the entrance. Here, Ferrau, this way!" he called.

The man hastened to obey the summons.

"Do you know whether the prisoner named Chupin was in the reception-room yesterday?"

"Yes, sir, he was; I conducted him there myself."

"And who was his visitor?" inquired Lecoq, eagerly; "a large man, was it not, very red in the face——"

"Excuse me, monsieur, the visitor was a lady; his aunt, he told me."

An exclamation of surprise escaped the lips of the judge and of the detective, and together they demanded:

"What was she like?"

"Small," replied the man, "with very fair complexion and light hair; she seemed to be a very respectable woman."

"It must have been one of the fugitives who escaped from Widow Chupin's hovel," exclaimed Lecoq.

Gevrol laughed loudly.

"Still that Russian princess." said he.

But the judge did not appear to enjoy the pleasantry.

"You forget yourself, monsieur," he said, severely. "You forget that the sneers you address to your comrade also touch me!"

The general saw that he had gone too far; and while he bestowed one of his most venomous glances upon Lecoq, he mumbled his excuses to the judge.

M. Segmuller did not hear them apparently. He bowed to the keeper, and motioned Lecoq to follow him.

"Run to the prefecture," he said as soon as they were out of hearing, "and ascertain how and under what pretext this woman obtained permission to vist Polyte Chupin."

CHAPTER XXIX.

LEFT alone, M. Segmuller returned mechanically to his office, guided by force of habit rather than by any volition of his own.

All his faculties were hard at work; and so great was his preoccupation that he, who was ordinarily the quintessence of politeness, entirely forgot to return the salutations which he received on his way.

How had this case until now, been conducted? By hazard, according to the caprice of events. Like a man lost in the darkness, he had left his course to chance, walking towards anything which, in the distance, seemed to him like a light.

To travel in this way is a useless expenditure of time and strength. He admitted this in recognizing the urgent and pressing necessity of some definite plan of action.

Since he had not succeeded in capturing the city by a sudden attack he was compelled to resign himself to the methodical delays of a regular and protracted siege.

And he decided to do this at once, for he felt that the hours were fleeting all too fast. He knew that delay only increased the uncertainty of success, and that the investigation of a crime becomes more and more difficult, in proportion as one is removed from the time when said crime was committed.

There were some things that might still be done.

Ought he not to confront the murderer, the Widow Chupin, and Polyte with the bodies of their victims?

Such horrible encounters are sometimes productive of unhoped-for results.

More than one murderer, when unsuspectedly brought into the presence of his victim, had changed color and lost his assurance.

There were other witnesses whom he could examine. Papillon, the coachman; the concierge of the mansion on the Rue de Bourgogne, where the two women had taken refuge for a moment, a Mme. Mil-

ner, the mistress of the Hotel de Mariembourg.

Would it not also be advisable to summon, with the least possible delay, some of the residents in the vicinity of the Poivriere, and some comrades of Polyte, as well as the proprietor of the Rainbow, where the victims and the murderer had passed a portion of the evening.

Certainly, one had no reason to hope for any great enlightenment from any particular one of these witnesses; but each one might add his conjectures, express an opinion, or be able to throw some light on the subject.

Goquet, the smiling clerk, acting in compliance with the orders of the judge, had just finished drawing up at least a dozen citations, when Lecoq reappeared.

"Well?" exclaimed the judge, eagerly.

Really, the question was superfluous. The result of his expedition was plainly written upon the face of the detective.

"Nothing—always nothing."

"But how can that be? Do they not know to whom the permission to visit Polyte Chupin was given?"

"Pardon, monsieur, they know but too well. We find only a fresh proof of the infernal skill with which the accomplice profits by every circumstance. The permit that was used yesterday was in the name of a sister of the Widow Chupin. Rose Adelaide Pitard. The card of admission was given her more than a week ago, in compliance with a request which was endorsed by the commissioner of police.

The surprise of the judge was so intense that it gave to his face an almost ludicrous expression.

"Is this aunt also in the plot?" he murmured.

The detective shook his head.

"I think not," he answered. "It was not she, at all events, who was in the prison parlor yesterday. The clerks at the *prefecture* remember the widow's sister very well, and gave me a full description of her. She is a woman over five feet in height, very dark-complexioned, very wrinkled and weather-beaten in appearance, and about sixty years of age. The visitor yesterday was small, blonde, and apparently not more than forty-five."

"If that is the case," interrupted M. Segmuller, "this visitor must be one of our fugitives."

"I do not think so."

"Who do you suppose she was, then?"

"The mistress of the Hotel de Mariembourg—that clever woman who succeeded so well in deceiving me. But she had better take care! There are means of verifying my suspicions.

The judge scarcely heard Lecoq's words, so enraged was he at the inconceivable audacity and marvellous devotion of these people who risked everything to preserve the incognito of the murderer.

"But how could the accomplice have known of the existence of this permit?"

"Oh, nothing could be easier, monsieur When the Widow Chupin and the accomplice held their interview at the station-house of the Barriere d'Italie, they both realized the necessity of warning Polyte. They tried to devise some way of seeing him; the old woman remembered her sister's card of admission, and the man made some excuse to borrow it."

"Such is undoubtedly the case," said M. Segmuller, approvingly. "It will be necessary to ascertain, however——"

Lecoq's bearing was that of a resolute man, whose eager zeal has no need of a stimulant.

"And I *will* ascertain." said he, "if you, monsieur, will entrust the matter to me. No aid to success shall be neglected. Before evening I would have two spies on the watch—one at the rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles, the other at the door of the Hotel de Mariembourg. If the accomplice attempted to visit Toinon, or Mme. Milner, he should be arrested. It would be our turn then!"

But there was no time to waste in words and in idle boastings. He checked himself, and took his hat preparatory to departure.

"Now," said he, "I must ask Monsieur le Juge for my liberty; if he has any orders to give me, he will find a trusty messenger in the corridor, Father Absinthe, one of my colleagues. I wish to discover some fact in regard to two of our most important articles of conviction, Lacheneur's letter and the ear-ring."

"Go, then," responded M. Segmuller, "and good luck to you!"

Good luck! The detective, indeed, looked for it. If, up to the present moment, he had taken his successive defeats good-humoredly, it was because he believed that he had a talisman in his pocket which would insure him victory at last.

"I shall be very stupid if I am not capable of discovering the owner of an article of such great value!" he said, referring to the diamond. "And when we find the owner, we discover, at the same time, the identity of our mysterious prisoner!"

The first step to be taken was to ascertain in what shop this ornament had been purchased. To go from jeweler to jeweler, asking: "Is this your work?" would be a tedious process.

Fortunately, Lecoq knew a man who would be willing to give him all the information in his power.

This man was an old Hollander, named Van Numen, who, where jewelry or precious stones were concerned, was without a rival in Paris.

He was employed in the prefecture in

the capacity of an expert in such matters. He was considered rich; but he was far more wealthy than people supposed. Shabby as he always was in appearance, he had a passion for diamonds. He always had some of them about his person, in a little box, which he drew out of his pocket a dozen times an hour, as a snuff-taker brings out his snuff-box.

This worthy man greeted Lecoq very affably. He put on his glasses, examined the jewel with a grimace of satisfaction, and, in the tone of an oracle, said:

"That stone is worth eight thousand francs, and it was set by Doisty, on the Rue de la Paix."

Twenty minutes later Lecoq entered the establishment of this celebrated jeweler.

Van Numen was not mistaken. Doisty immediately recognized the ornament, which had, indeed, come from his store. But to whom had he sold it? He could not recollect, for it had passed out of his hands three or four years before.

"But wait a moment," he added, "I will ask my wife, who has an incomparable memory."

Mme. Doisty deserved this eulogium. A single glance at the jewel enabled her to say that she had seen this ear-ring before, and that the pair had been purchased from them by the Marquise d'Arlange.

"You must recollect," she added, turning to her husband, "that the marquise paid us only nine thousand francs on account, and that we had all the trouble in the world in collecting the remainder."

Her husband did remember this circumstance.

"Now," said the detective, "I would like the address of this marquise."

"She lives in the Faubourg St. Germain," responded Mme. Doisty, "near the Esplanade des Invalides."

CHAPTER XXX.

WHILE in the presence of the jeweler, Lecoq had refrained from any demonstration of satisfaction.

But when he had left the store, he evinced such delirious joy that the amazed passers-by wondered if the man were not mad. He did not walk, he fairly danced over the stones, gesticulating all the while in the most ridiculous fashion, as he addressed this triumphant monologue to the empty air:

"At last," said he, "this affair emerges from the mystery that has enshrouded it. At last I reach the veritable actors in the drama, these exalted personages whom I had suspected. Ah! Gevrol, illustrious General! you wished a Russian princess, but you will be obliged to content yourself with a simple marquise."

But this species of vertigo gradually disappeared. His good sense re-asserted itself, and the young man felt that he would have need of all his coolness, all his penetration, and all his sagacity to bring this expedition to a successful termination.

What course should he pursue, on entering the presence of the marquise, in order to draw a full confession from her, and to obtain all the details of the murder, as well as the murderer's name?

"It will be best to threaten her, to frighten her into confession, that will be the best way. If I give her time for reflection, I shall learn nothing."

He paused in his cogitations, for he had reached the abode of the Marquise d'Arlange—a charming house, surrounded by a garden; and before entering the mansion, he deemed it advisable to learn something of its interior and of its inmates.

"It is here, then," he murmured, that I shall find the solution of the enigma! Here behind those rich curtains crouches the frightened fugitive of the other night. For what an agony of fear must torture her since she has discovered the loss of the jewel!"

For more than an hour sheltered beneath a neighboring *porte-cochere*, Lecoq stood watching the house. He wished to see the face of some inmate of the mansion. But his time was lost. Not a face showed itself at the windows, not a valet traversed the court.

At last, losing patience, he determined to make some inquiries in the neighborhood.

He could not take a decisive step without having some knowledge of the people he was to encounter. He was wondering where he could obtain the desired information, when he perceived, on the opposite side of the street, a wine merchant smoking on the pavement in front of his shop.

He approached him, and pretending that he had forgotten an address, politely inquired which house was the abode of the Marquise d'Arlange.

Without a word, without even condescending to remove his pipe from his mouth, the man pointed to the house.

But there was a way of rendering him communicative, and that was to enter his establishment, call for something to drink, and invite the proprietor to drink with him

This the young man did, and the sight of two well-filled glasses unbound, as by a miracle, th tongue of the worthy shop-keeper

One could not have found a better man to interrogate, as he had been established in that quarter for ten years, and was

honored by the patronage of most of the residents.

"I pity you if you are going to the house of the marquise to collect a bill," he remarked to Lecoq. "You will have plenty of time to learn the way to the house before you see the color of your money. You will only be another of the many creditors who never let that bell rest."

"The devil! Is she so poor as all that?"

"Poor! Every one knows that she has an income of twenty thousand livres, without counting this house. But when one spends double one's income every year, you know———"

He stopped short, to call Lecoq's attention to two ladies who were passing—one, rather more than forty years of age, dressed in black; the other, very young, and still clothed in the garb of a schoolgirl.

"And that," he added, "is the marquise's grand-daughter, Mlle. Claire, attended by her governess, Mlle. Smith."

Lecoq's head whirled.

"Her grand-daughter?' he stammered.

"Yes—the daughter of her deceased son, if you like that any better."

"How old is the marquise, then?"

"At least sixty; but one would never suspect it. She is one of those persons who will live a hundred years, like trees. And what an old wretch she is! She would think no more of knocking me over the head than I would of emptying this glass of wine———"

"Pardon," interrupted Lecoq, "but does she live alone in that great house?"

"Yes—that is—with only her grand-daughter, the governess, and two servants. But what is the matter with you?"

It was not strange that he asked this question, for Lecoq had turned as white as his shirt. The magic edifice of his hopes had crumbled beneath the weight of this man's words as completely as if it were a frail card-house constructed by some child.

"Nothing—nothing at all," he responded in an uncertain voice.

But he could not endure this torture of uncertainty any longer. He went to the house and rang the bell.

The servant who came to open the door examined him attentively, then replied, that madame la marquise was in the country.

Evidently he did him the honor of taking him for some creditor.

But he insisted so adroitly, he gave him to understand so explicitly that he did not come to collect money, he spoke so earnestly of urgent business, that the man finally admitted him to the vestibule, telling him that he would go and ascertain if madame had really gone out.

She was at home. An instant after the valet returned to tell Lecoq to follow him; and after passing a large and magnificently furnished drawing-room, he conducted him into a charming boudoir, hung with rose-color.

There, in a large reclining chair by the fire-place, sat an old woman, large, bony, and terrible of aspect, loaded with ornaments and with paint. She was engaged in knitting a stripe of green wool.

She turned towards the visitor just enough to show him the *rouge* on one cheek; then, as he seemed rather frightened—a fact flattering to her vanity—she spoke to him quite affably.

"Ah, well! young man; what brings you here?"

Lecoq was not frightened, but he was intensely disappointed to see that Mme. d'Arlange could not be one of the women who had visited the Widow Chupin's saloon on that memorable night.

There was nothing about her appearance that corresponded in the least with the description given by Papillon.

Then the young man remembered the small foot-prints left in the snow by the two fugitives. The foot of this marquise, which showed itself below the bottom of her dress, was truly colossal in size.

"Well! are you dumb?" inquired the old lady, raising her voice.

Without making a direct response, Lecoq drew from his pocket the precious ear-ring, and placing it upon the table beside her, he said:

"I bring you this article which I have found, and which, I am told, belongs to you."

Madame d'Arlange laid down her knitting to examine the jewel.

"It is true," she said, after a moment, "that this ornament formerly belonged to me. It was a fancy that I had, about four years ago, and it cost me dear—at least twenty thousand francs. Ah! Doisty, the man who sold me these diamonds, must make a handsome living. But I had a grand-daughter to educate! Pressing need of money compelled me to sell them."

"To whom?" inquired Lecoq, eagerly.

"Eh!" exclaimed the lady, evidently shocked at his audacity, "you are very curious, upon my word!"

"Excuse me, madame, but I am so anxious to find the owner of this valuable ornament."

Madame d'Arlange regarded her visitor with an air of mingled curiosity and surprise.

"Such honesty!" said she. "Oh, oh! And, of course, you do not hope for a sou by way of reward———"

"Madame!"

"Good, good! There is not the least need for you to turn as red as a poppy, young man. I sold these diamonds to a

great German lady—for the nobility in Austria have some money left—to the Baroness de Watchau."

"And where does this lady live?"

"At the Pere la Chaise, probably, since she died about a year ago. These women of the present day—a turn in the waltz, and a current of air, and it is all over with them! In my day, after each galop, young girls swallowed a great glass of sweetened wine, and sat down between two doors. And we did very well, as you see."

"But, madame," insisted Lecoq, "the Baron de Watchau must have left heirs—a husband, children——"

"No one but a brother, who holds a court position at Vienna; and who could not leave even to attend the funeral. He sent orders that all his sister's personal property should be sold—not even excepting her wardrobe—and the money sent to him."

Lecoq could not repress an exclamation of disappointment.

"How unfortunate!" he murmured.

"Why?" asked the old lady. "Under these circumstances, the diamonds will probably remain in your hands, and I am rejoiced at it; it will be a just recompense for your honesty."

If fate, to all Lecoq's other afflictions, had determined to add that of irony, his cup of sorrow would, indeed, be full. The Marquise d'Arlange inflicted upon him the most exquisite torture when with every appearance of sincerity, she expressed a wish that he might never find the lady who had lost this costly jewel.

To cry out, to give vent to his anger, to reproach this old woman for her stupidity would have afforded him ineffable consolation. But in that case, what would become of his *role* of honest young man?

He forced his lips to display a smile; he even stammered an acknowledgement of her goodness. Then, as if he had no more to expect, he bowed low, and withdrew, overwhelmed by this new misfortune.

Owing to some strange fatality, or to the marvelous skill of his adversaries, he had seen all the threads upon which he had relied to guide him out of this labyrinth, break in his hands.

Was he the dupe of some new comedy? This was not probable.

If the murderer's accomplice had taken the jeweler, Doisty, into his confidence, he would have told him to reply to any inquiries by saying that he did not know to whom the diamonds had been sold, or that it had not come from his establishment.

But this complication of circumstances proved Doisty's sincerity at least.

Then the young man had other reasons for not doubting the truth of the assertions made by the marquise. A peculiar look, which he had detected between the jeweler and his wife, was a sufficient authentication.

This glance said very plainly that, in their opinion, the marquise, in purchasing the diamonds, had engaged in a little speculation, more common than people suppose among women of the world. She had bought on credit, to sell at a loss, profiting momentarily by the difference between the sum she had paid on account and the price she received for the jewels.

Lecoq was resolved to fathom the mystery that surrounded the ornament; and with this object in view, he returned to Doisty's establishment, and, by means of a plausible pretext, succeeded in gaining a sight of the books in which the proprietor recorded his sales.

On the year and the month that Mme. Doisty had mentioned, the sale of these ear-rings had been recorded, not only upon the day-book, but upon the ledger. The nine thousand francs paid by Mme. d'Arlange at long intervals were also duly recorded.

How Mme. Milner might inscribe a false entry upon her register, one could easily understand. But it was absurd to suppose that the jeweler had falsified all his accounts for four years.

The facts, therefore, were indisputable; still the young detective was not satisfied.

He hurried to the Faubourg-Saint-Honore, to the house which the Baroness de Watchau had occupied, and there he found a good-natured concierge, who informed him that after the decease of that poor lady, her furniture and her personal property had been taken to an establishment on the Rue Drouot. "And the sale was under the charge of M. Petit," added the obliging concierge.

Without losing a minute, Lecoq ran to the establishment of this auctioneer, who made a specialty of rare collections of bric-a-brac.

M. Petit remembered the "Watchau sale" very well; it had made quite a sensation at the time, and he soon found a long catalogue of the articles sold among his papers.

Many jewels were mentioned, with the sum paid, and the names of the parties purchasing; but there was not the slightest allusion to the accursed ear-rings.

Lecoq drew out the diamond which he had in his pocket. The auctioneer could not remember that he had ever seen it; but this was no evidence to the contrary—so many articles passed through his hands!

But this much he could declare upon oath; that the brother of the baroness, her heir, had received nothing—not so much as a pin's worth of his sister's

effects; and that he had been in a great hurry to receive the proceeds, which amounted to the very pleasant sum of one hundred and sixty-seven thousand five hundred and thirty francs, after all expenses had been deducted.

"So everything that this lady possessed was sold?" inquired Lecoq.

"Everything."

"And what is the name of this brother?"

"Watchau, also. The baroness had probably married one of her relatives. This brother, until last year, occupied a very prominent diplomatic position. He resides at Berlin now, I think."

Certainly this information would not seem to indicate that these witnesses had been tampered with; and yet Lecoq was not satisfied.

"It is very strange," he thought, on regaining his lodgings, "that to which ever side I turn, in this affair, I find Germany. The murderer comes from Leipsic, Madame Milner must be a Bavarian, and now here is an Austrian baroness."

It was too late to make any further inquiries that evening, and Lecoq went to bed; but the next morning, at an early hour, he resumed his investigations with fresh ardor.

Now, there seemed to be only one chance of success left: the letter signed by Lacheneur, which had been found in the pocket of the murdered soldier.

This letter, judging from the half-effaced heading, must have been written in a *cafe* on the Boulevard Beaumarchais.

To discover in which *cafe* would be only child's play.

The fourth restaurant-keeper to whom Lecoq exhibited this letter recognized the paper as his.

But neither he, nor his wife, nor the young lady at the desk, nor the waiters, nor any of the guests present at the time, had ever in their lives heard the three syllables of this name, Lacheneur.

What was he to do now? Was the case entirely hopeless? Not yet.

Had not the dying soldier declared that this Lacheneur was an old comedian?

Seizing upon this frail clue, as a drowning man clutches at the merest fragment of the floating wreck, Lecoq turned his steps in another direction, and hurried from theatre to theatre, asking every one, from the porters to the managers:

"Do you not know an actor named Lacheneur?"

Everywhere he met with the same response, not unfrequently enlivened by rough jokes. And very often those whom he interrogated inquired:

"What sort of a looking man is your artist?"

What could he reply? All his responses were necessarily limited to that phrase uttered by Toinon: "I thought him a very respectable-looking man." This was not a very graphic description, however. Besides, it was rather doubtful what a woman like the wife of Polyte Chupin meant by the word "respectable." Did she apply it to the man's age, to his personal appearance, or to his apparent fortune."

Sometimes they inquired:

"What *roles* does your comedian play?"

And the young man, in his ignorance, could make no reply; but this much he could have said with truth, that this Lacheneur was playing a *role* now that made him, Lecoq, wild with despair.

He next had recourse to a mode of investigation which is generally the last resort of the police, but which is generally successful, because it is so sensible and simple.

He determined to examine all the books in which the law compels the proprietors of hotels and lodging houses to keep a record of their guests.

Rising long before daybreak, and going to bed late at night, he spent all his time in visiting the hotels, furnished houses, and lodgings in Paris.

Vain search! Not once did he find the name of Lacheneur that haunted his brain. Was there really such a name?" Was it not a pseudonym, invented for convenience? He had not found it even in the *Almanach Botlin*, where one finds all the most singular and absurd names in France—those which are formed of the most fantastic mingling of syllables.

But nothing could daunt him or turn him from the almost impossible task to which he had devoted himself. His obstinacy amounted well-nigh to monomania.

He was no longer subject to occasional out-bursts of anger, which were quickly repressed; he lived in a state of constant exasperation, which impaired the clearness of his mind not a little.

No more theories, subtle reasoning, and ingenious deductions. He pursued his search, without method, without order, and much as Father Absinthe might have done when under the influence of alcohol.

Perhaps he had come to rely less upon his own shrewdness than upon chance to drive away the shadows which he divined, which he felt, which he breathed.

CHAPTER XXXI.

If one throws a heavy stone into a lake it produces a very considerable commotion, and the whole mass of water is agitated. But the great movement lasts only for a moment; the waves diminish in violence in proportion as the circles enlarge, the surface regains its smooth-

ness, and soon no trace remains of the stone, now buried in the depths below.

So it is with events that occur in our daily life, however momentous they may appear. It seems as if their impression would endure for years—nonsense! Time closes over them more quickly than the water of the lake; and more rapidly than the stone, they sink into the depths of the past.

At the end of a fortnight, the frightful crime committed in the Widow Chupin's saloon—the triple murder which had made all Paris shudder, with which all the papers had been full, was forgotten as entirely as any commonplace assassination in the reign of Charlemagne.

Only at the Palais de Justice, at the Prefecture, and at the prison, was it remembered.

The efforts of M. Segmuller—and Heaven knows that he had spared none—had met with no better success than those of Lecoq.

Close interrogations, skilfully managed examinations, sharp questions, insinuations, menaces, promises, all spent themselves in vain against that invincible force—the strongest man has at his disposal—the force of absolute denial.

One and the same spirit seemed to animate the Widow Chupin, Polyte, Toinon, the virtuous, and Mme. Milner, the mistress of the Hotel de Mariembourg.

Their depositions proved that they were all in league with the accomplice; and that they all acted in obedience to the same policy. But what did this knowledge avail!

The attitude of these witnesses never varied! It might happen, sometimes, that their looks gave the lie to their denials; but one could read in their eyes their unshaken determination to conceal the truth.

There were moments when the judge, overpowered by a sense of the insufficiency of purely moral weapons, almost regretted the overthrow of the Inquisition.

Yes, in the presence of these allegations, whose impudence almost amounted to insult, he no longer wondered at the barbarities practiced by the judges of the Middle ages—the rack which broke the muscles of its victims, the red-hot pincers, and all those horrible tortures which tore out the truth with the flesh itself.

The manner of the murderer was unaltered, or, if it were, it was only because he played his part with greater perfection each day, like a man who has become accustomed to strange clothing, and who is no longer made uncomfortable by it.

His assurance in the presence of the judge had increased, as if he were more sure of himself, and as if he had in some way learned that the prosecution had made no progress whatever.

During one of his later examinations, he had ventured to say, with something very like irony.

"Why do you keep me so long in the secret cells, Monsieur le Juge? Am I never to be set at liberty, or sent to the court of assizes? Am I to suffer much longer on account of the idea that has taken possession of you (how, I cannot tell), that I am a great personage?"

"I shall keep you until you have confessed," M. Segmuller had responded:

"Confessed what?"

"Oh! you know very well."

This strange man had then shrugged his shoulders, and in that half-despondent, half-mocking tone which was habitual to him, he had responded!

"In that case, there is no hope of my ever leaving this accursed prison!"

It was by reason of this conviction, undoubtedly, that he seemed to be making preparations for an indefinite stay.

He had succeeded in obtaining a portion of the contents of his trunk; and he manifested an almost childish joy in once more entering into possession of his property.

Thanks to the money which had been found upon his person and deposited with the clerk, he was able to procure many little luxuries, which are never denied prisoners who have not yet been tried for whatever may be the charges against them; they have a right to be considered innocent until the jury has decided to the contrary.

To pass away the time, he had asked for a volume of Beranger's poems; and as his request had been granted, he spent most of the day in learning the songs by heart, and in singing them, in a loud voice, and with considerable taste.

He pretended that he was cultivating a talent which would be useful to him when he was again at liberty.

For he had no doubt of his acquittal; at least, so he declared.

He was anxious about the date of his trial; but was not in the least anxious about the result.

He appeared despondent only when he spoke of his profession. He pined for the stage. He almost wept when he thought of his fantastic, many-colored costumes, of his audience, and of his sallies of wit, accompanied by bursts of noisy music.

In his demeanor he had become more frank, more communicative, more submissive; in short, a better fellow

It was with marked *empressement* that he embraced every opportunity to babble about his past. He liked to recount his adventures during his roving life with M. Simpson, the showman. He had, of course, traveled a great deal; and he remembered all he had seen, and possessed

an inexhaustible fund of amusing stories, with which he entertained his keepers.

And every word, and even his slightest action, was characterized by such naturalness, that the employes of the prison no longer doubted the truth of his assertions.

The head-keeper was more difficult to convince.

He had declared that this pretended buffoon must be a dangerous criminal who had escaped from the galleys, and who was for this reason determined to conceal his antecedents. Believing this, he had left no means untried to prove it.

For more than a fortnight May was submitted to the scrutiny of members of the police-force and detectives, public and private.

Not one of them recognized him. His photograph had been sent to all the prisons and police headquarters throughout the empire; but not one of the officials remembered May's features.

Other circumstances occurred, each of which had its influence, and they all spoke in favor of the prisoner.

The second bureau of the Prefecture found positive traces of the existence of a foreign artist, named Tringlot, who was probably the man referred to in May's story. This Tringlot had been dead several years.

Moreover, inquiries which had been made in Germany, revealed the fact that a certain Monsieur Simpson was very well known in that country, having achieved great renown as a circus manager.

Before so many proofs, the headkeeper was forced to yield, and he openly confessed that he had been mistaken.

"The prisoner, May," he wrote to the judge, "is really and truly what he pretends to be. There can be no further doubt on the subject."

This was done at the suggestion of Gevrol.

So M. Segmuller and Lecoq remained alone in their opinion.

It is true that their opinion was worthy, at least, of consideration, since they alone knew all the details of the investigation which had been conducted with strict secrecy.

But that mattered little. To struggle on against all the world is always unpleasant, and not a little dangerous, even if one is a thousand times right.

The "May affair" had become notorious among the members of the police-force; and Lecoq was assailed by rough jokes whenever he appeared at the Prefecture. Nor did the judge escape entirely.

More than one colleague on meeting him in the corridor, inquired. with a smile, what he had done with his Gaspard Hauser, with his man in the Iron Mask, with his mysterious mountebank.

Both M. Segmuller and Lecoq were afflicted with the angry impatience every man feels when he is absolutely certain that he is right, but has no means of proving it,

They both lost their appetites; they grew thin and haggard.

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed the judge, sometimes; "why did Escorval fall! Had it not been for his accursed mishap, he would have been obliged to endure these perplexities, and I—I should be enjoying myself like other people."

"And I thought myself so shrewd!" murmured the young detective.

But the idea of yielding never once occurred to them. Although their temperaments were diametrically opposed to each other, both men had sworn to solve this tantalizing enigma.

Lecoq, indeed, had resolved to renounce all other claims upon his time, and to devote himself entirely to the study of this case.

"Henceforth," he said to M. Segmuller, "I also constitute myself a prisoner; and although he will not see me, I shall not lose sight of him!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

BETWEEN the cell occupied by May and the roof the prison was a loft, the ceiling of which was so low, that a man of average height could not stand upright in the room. A few straggling rays of sunlight peering through the interstices of the wall, relieved the dense gloom but slightly.

In this inattractive abode, Lecoq, one fine morning, established himself.

It was at the hour when the prisoner was taking his daily walk, under the surveillance of two keepers, and the zealous detective could, without restraint, proceed to his work of installation.

Armed with a pickaxe he removed two or three stones from the floor, making a small aperture, and then set himself at work to make another opening through the timbers below.

The hole which he made was in the form of a tunnel. Very large at the top, it had dwindled to an opening not more than two-thirds of an inch in diameter when it pierced the ceiling of the cell below.

The place where this aperture was made had been chosen so skilfully in advance that it was in the midst of some stains and patches of mold; hence it was impossible for the prisoner to detect it from below.

While Lecoq was at work, the keeper of the prison and Gevrol, who had insisted upon accompanying him, appeared

upon the threshold of the loft, laughing and sneering.

"So this is to be your observatory, Monsieur Lecoq?" remarked Gevrol.

"Yes, monsieur."

"You will not be very comfortable here."

"I shall be less uncomfortable than you suppose. I have brought a large blanket, and I shall stretch myself out upon the floor and sleep here.

"So that, night and day, you will have your eye on the prisoner?"

"Yes, night and day.

"Without giving yourself time to eat or drink?" inquired Gevrol.

"Pardon! Father Absinthe will bring me my meals, execute any commissions I may have, and take my place on guard, if necessary."

The jealous General laughed loudly; but the laugh was a trifle constrained.

"Well, I pity you," he said.

"Very possibly."

"Do you know what you will look like, with your eye glued to that hole?"

"Say it! You need be under no constraint."

"Ah, well! you will look like one of those silly naturalists who put all sorts of little insects under a magnifying glass, and spend their lives in watching them."

Lecoq had finished his work; he rose from the floor.

"No comparison could be more just, General," he replied. "You have guessed it. To these naturalists, of whom you speak so slightingly, I owe the idea I am about putting into execution. By dint of studying these little creatures—as you say—under a microscope, these patient and gifted men are enabled to discover the habits and the instincts of the insect world. Very well. What they can do with an insect, I will do with a man!"

"Oh ho!" said the keeper, considerably astonished.

"Yes; this is my plan, monsieur," continued Lecoq. "I wish to learn this prisoner's secret; I will have it. I have sworn it, and I shall have it, because, however strong his courage may be, he will have his moments of weakness, and then I shall be there. I shall be there, if his will fails him, if believing himself alone he lets his mask fall for a moment, if he forgets his part for an instant, if some indiscreet word escapes him in his slumber, if despair elicits a groan, a gesture, a look—I shall be there."

The implacable resolution that vibrated in the young man's voice made a deep impression upon the keeper.

For an instant he was a believer in Lecoq's theory; and he was impressed by the strangeness of this conflict between a prisoner, determined to preserve the secret of his personality, and the prosecution, equally determined to wrest it from him.

"Upon my word! my boy, you are not wanting in courage and energy."

"Although it is misdirected," growled Gevrol.

He made this remark very slowly and deliberately; but in his secret soul he was by no means convinced of its truth. Faith is contagious, and he was troubled in spite of himself by Lecoq's imperturbable assurance.

What if this debutant in his profession should be right, and he, Gevrol, the oracle of the prefecture, wrong! What shame and ridicule would be his portion!

But once again he inwardly swore that this inexperienced man could be no match for an old veteran, and he added:

"The chief of police must have more money than he knows what to do with, to pay two men for such a nonsensical job as this."

Lecoq did not reply to this slighting remark. For more than a fortnight the General had improved every opportunity of making himself disagreeable so well, that the young man doubted his power to control his temper if the discussion were continued.

It would be better to keep silence, and to work and wait for success. To succeed! that would be revenge enough!

Moreover, he was impatient to see these unwelcome visitors depart. Perhaps he believed that Gevrol was quite capable of attracting the prisoner's attention by some unusual sound.

As soon as they went away, Lecoq hastily spread his blanket, and stretched himself out upon it in such a position that he could alternately apply his eye and his ear to the aperture.

In this position he had an admirable view of the cell below. He could see the door, the bed, the table, the chair; only the small space near the window, and the window itself, were beyond his range of observation.

He had scarcely completed his survey, when he heard the bolts rattle: the prisoner was returning from his walk.

He seemed in excellent spirits, and was just completing what was, undoubtedly, a very interesting story, since the keeper lingered for a moment to hear the conclusion. Lecoq was delighted with the success of his experiment. He could hear as easily as he could see. Each sound reached his ear distinctly; he had not lost a single word of the recital, which was amusing, but rather coarse.

The guard departed. May walked across his cell a few times, then took up his volume of "Beranger," and for an hour or more seemed completely engrossed in its contents. Finally, he threw himself down upon the bed.

He remained there until the hour of

his evening repast, when he rose and ate with an excellent appetite. Then he resumed the study of his book, and did not go to bed until the lights were extinguished.

Lecoq knew that during the night his eyes would not serve him, but, for all that, he hoped that some tell-tale word would escape the prisoner.

In this expectation he was disappointed. May tossed restlessly upon his pallet; he sighed, and one might have thought that he was sobbing, but not a syllable escaped his lips.

He remained in bed until very late the next morning; but on hearing the bell sound the hour of breakfast, eleven o'clock, he sprang from his couch with a bound, and after capering about his cell for a few moments, he began to sing, in a loud and cheerful voice, the old ditty:

"Diogene
Sous ton manteau
Libre et content, je ris, je bois, sans gene——"

He did not cease his singing until the keeper entered his cell to bring him his breakfast.

The day differed in no respect from the one that had preceded it, nor did the night. The same might be said of the next day and of the days which followed it.

To sing, to eat, to sleep, to care for his hands and his nails—such was the life of the so-called buffoon. His manner, which never varied, was that of a naturally cheerful man, terribly bored.

Such was the perfection of this enigmatical person's acting, that Lecoq, after six days and nights of constant surveillance, had detected nothing decisive, nor even surprising.

Yet he did not despair. He had noticed that, every morning, while the employes of the prison were busy in distributing the food of the prisoners, this man repeated his song of Diogenes.

"Evidently this song is a signal," Lecoq said to himself. "What is going on there by the window that I cannot see? I will know to-morrow."

The following morning he arranged that May should be taken on his morning walk at half-past ten o'clock, and he then insisted that the keeper should accompany him to the prisoner's cell.

That worthy functionary was not very well pleased with this change in the usual order of things.

"What do you wish to show me?" he asked. "What is it that is so very curious?"

"Perhaps nothing," replied Lecoq, perhaps something of great importance."

Eleven o'clock sounding soon after, he began singing the prisoner's song:

"Diogene
Sous ton manteau——"

He had scarcely finished the second line, when a bit of bread, no larger than a bullet, adroitly thrown through the window, dropped at his feet.

A thunderbolt falling in May's cell would not have terrified the superintendent as much as did this inoffensive projectile.

He stood in silent dismay; his mouth wide open, his eyes starting from their sockets, as if he distrusted the evidence of his own senses.

What a disgrace! An instant before he would have staked his life upon the inviolability of the secret cells. He beheld his prison dishonored—sneered at.

"A communication! a communication!" he repeated, with a horrified air.

Quick as lightning, Lecoq picked up the missile snd held it up in triumph.

"I said that this man was in communication with his friends," he murmured.

Lecoq's evident delight changed the superintendent's stupor into fury.

"Ah! my prisoners are writing!" he exclaimed, wild with passion. "My guards are acting as postmen!" By my faith, this matter shall be looked into."

He rushed towards the door; Lecoq stopped him.

"What are you going to do, monsieur?" he asked.

"I am going to call all the employes of this prison together, and inform them that there is a traitor among them, and that I must know who he is, as I wish to make an example of him. And if, in twenty-four hours from now, the culprit has not been discovered, every man connected with this prison shall be removed."

Again he started to leave the room, and Lecoq, this time, had almost to use force to detain him.

"Be calm, sir; be calm," he entreated.

"I *will* punish——"

"Yes, yes—I understand that—but wait until you have regained your self-possession. It is possible that the guilty party may be one of the prisoners who aid in the distribution of food every morning."

"What does that matter?"

"Pardon! It matters a great deal. If you noise this discovery abroad, if you say a single word about it, we shall never discover the truth. The traitor will not be fool enough to confess his guilt. We must be silent and wait. We will keep a close watch and detect the culprit in the very act."

These objections were so sensible that the keeper yielded.

"So be it," he sighed, "I will be patient. But let us see the missive that was enclosed in this morsel of bread."

Lecoq would not consent to this proposition.

"I warned M. Segmuller that there would probably be some new develop-

ments this morning; and he must be waiting for me in his office. I must reserve the pleasure of opening this envelope for him."

The superintendent's face clouded. He would have given a great deal could he have kept this affair a secret; but that was entirely out of the question.

"Let us go and find the judge, then," said he, despondently.

They started, and on their way Lecoq endeavored to convince the worthy man that he was quite wrong to deplore a circumstance which would be of incalculable benefit to the prosecution. Had he, until now, supposed himself more cunning than his prisoners? What an illusion! Had not the ingenuity of the prisoner always defied. and will it not always defy, the *finesse* of his guardians?

But they had reached the office, and at the sight of them, M. Segmuller and his clerk both sprang from their seats. They read startling news in the face of the young detective.

"What is it?" demanded the judge, eagerly.

Lecoq's sole response was to place the precious morsel of bread upon the desk. The judge opened it.

It contained a tiny scrap of the thinnest tissue paper.

M. Segmuller unfolded it, and smoothed it upon the palm of his hand. As soon as he glanced at it, his brow contracted.

"Ah! this note is written in cipher," he exclaimed, striking his clinched fist violently upon his desk.

"We must not lose patience," said Lecoq, tranquilly.

He took the slip of paper, and read aloud the numbers that were inscribed upon it. They were as follows, separated by commas:

235, 15, 3, 8, 25, 2, 16, 208, 5, 360, 4, 36, 19, 7, 14, 118, 84, 23, 9, 40, 11, 99.

"And so we shall learn nothing from this note," murmured the keeper.

"Why not?" responded the smiling clerk. "There is no system of cipher which cannot be read with a little skill and patience. There are some people who make it their business."

"You are right," approved Lecoq. "And I, myself, once had a knack at it."

"What!" exclaimed the judge; "do you hope to find the key to this cipher?"

"With time, yes."

He was about placing the paper in his breast-pocket, but the judge begged him to examine it further.

He did so; and after a little, his face brightened, and striking his forehead with his open palm, he cried:

"I have found it!"

An exclamation of surprise, and possibly of incredulity, escaped the judge, the keeper, and the clerk.

"At least I think so," added Lecoq, more cautiously. "The prisoner and his accomplice have, if I am not mistaken, adopted the system called the double book cipher. This system is very simple.

"The correspondents first agree upon some particular book; and both obtain a copy of the same edition.

"What if one desires to communicate with the other?

"He opens the book hap-hazard, and begins by writing the number of the page.

"Then he must seek, upon that page, the words necessary to give expression to his thought. If the first word which he desires to write is the twentieth word printed on the page, he writes the number 20; then he begins to count one, two, three, until he finds the next word that he wishes to use. If this word happens to be the sixth, he writes the figure 6; and he continues in this way until he has written all he wishes to communicate.

"You see, now, how the correspondent who receives this mission must begin. He finds the page indicated, and each figure represents a word."

"Nothing could be more clear," said the judge, approvingly.

"If this note that I hold here," pursued Lecoq, "had been exchanged between two persons who were at liberty, it would be folly to attempt its translation. This simple system is the only one which has completely baffled the efforts of the curious, simply because there is no way of ascertaining the book agreed upon.

"But such is not the case here; May is a prisoner, and he has but one book in his possession. 'The songs of Beranger.' Let this book be sent for——"

The keeper was actually enthusiastic.

"I will run and fetch it myself," he interrupted.

But Lecoq, with a gesture detained him.

"Above all, monsieur, take care that May does not discover his book has been tampered with. If he has returned from his promenade, make some excuse to have him sent out of his cell again; and do not allow him to return there while we are using his book."

"Oh, trust me!" replied the superintendent.

He left the room, and so intense was his zeal, that he was back again in less than a quarter of an hour, bringing in triumph a little volume in 32mo.

With a trembling hand, Lecoq opened to page 235, and began to count.

The fifteenth word on the page was *I;* the third after, was the word *have;* the eighth following that, was *told;* the twenty-fifth, *her;* the second, *your;* the sixteenth, *wishes.*

Hence the meaning of those six numbers was:

"I have told her your wishes."

The three persons who had witnessed this display of shrewdness could not restrain their admiration.

"Bravo! Lecoq," exclaimed the judge.

"I will no longer bet a hundred to one on May," thought the clerk.

But Lecoq was still busily engaged in deciphering the missive, and soon, in a voice trembling with gratified vanity, he read the entire note aloud. It was as follows:

"I have told her your wishes; she submits. Our safety is assured; we are waiting your orders to act. Hope! Courage!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHAT a disappointment, after the fever of anxiety and expectation that had held the witnesses of this scene motionless and breathless!

This short and unintelligible epistle afforded no information whatever upon the subject in which all present were so deeply interested.

The light of hope which had sparkled in M. Segmuller's eye a moment before, faded; and Goquet returned to his former opinion, that the prisoner had the advantage over his accusers.

"How unfortunate," remarked the superintendent, with a shade of sarcasm in his voice, "that so much trouble, and such marvelous penetration, should be wasted!"

Lecoq, whose confidence seemed unalterable, regarding him with a bantering air, replied;

"So monsieur thinks I have wasted my time! Such is not my opinion. This scrap of paper undeniably proves that if any person has been mistaken in regard to the identity of the prisoner, it certainly was not I."

"Very well. M. Gevrol and I may have been mistaken; no one is infallible. But have you learned anything more than you knew before? Have you made any progress?"

"Why, yes, monsieur. Now that people know the prisoner is not what he pretends to be, instead of annoying and hampering me, perhaps they will aid to discover who he really is."

Lecoq's tone, and his allusion to the difficulties he had encountered, wounded the keeper. But precisely because he felt the blood mount to his forehead under this just reproof, he resolved to cut short this discussion with an inferior.

"You are right," said he, sarcastically. "This May must be a very great and illustrious personage. Only, my dear Monsieur Lecoq (for there is an only), do me the favor to explain how such an important personage could disappear, and the police not be advised of it? A man of rank, such as you suppose this prisoner to be, usually has a family, friends, relatives, proteges, and extended connections; and yet not a single person has lifted his voice during the three weeks that this May has been under my charge! Come, admit that you have not thought of this."

The keeper had just advanced the only serious objection that could be found against the theory advanced by the prosecution.

But Lecoq had seen it before. It had not been once out of his mind; and he had racked his brain to find some satisfactory explanation.

Undoubtedly he would have made some angry retort, as people are wont to do when their antagonists discover the weak spot in their armor, had not M. Segmuller interposed.

"All these recriminations do no good," he remarked, calmly; "we can make no progress while these continue. It would be much wiser to decide upon the course to be pursued under the present circumstances."

Thus reminded of the present situation of affairs, the young man smiled; all his rancor was forgotten.

"There is, I think, but one course to pursue," he replied, modestly; "and I believe it will be successful by reason of its simplicity. We must substitute a communication of our own composition for this one. That will not be at all difficult, since I have the key to the cipher. I shall only be obliged to purchase a similar volume of Beranger's songs; and May, believing that he is addressing his accomplice, will respond in all sincerity, and will reveal everything, perhaps——"

"Pardon!" interrupted the keeper, "how will you obtain possession of his reply?"

"Ah! you ask me too much. I know the way in which his letters have reached him. For the rest, I will watch and find a way—never fear!"

Goquet could not conceal an approving grin. If he had happened to have ten francs on hand, he would have risked them all on Lecoq just then.

"First, I will replace this missive by one of my own composition. To-morrow, at the breakfast hour, if the prisoner gives the signal, Father Absinthe will throw the morsel of bread inclosing the note through the window, while I from my observatory watch the effect."

He was so delighted with this plan that he at once rang the bell, and when the messenger appeared, he gave him a ten sous piece and requested him to go at

once and purchase some of the thinnest tissue paper.

When he was in possession of the paper, which was apparently exactly like that upon which the note was written, he seated himself at the clerk's desk, and armed with the volume of Beranger's poems, he began the composition of his missive, copying as closely as possible the forms of the figures used by the unknown correspondent.

This task did not occupy him more than ten minutes. Fearing to commit some blunder, he reproduced the words of the original letter, with but little change in the words themselves, but with an entire change of meaning.

His note read as follows:

"I have told her your wishes; she does not submit. Our safety is threatened. We are awaiting your orders. I tremble."

When this was completed, he rolled up the paper, and enclosing it in the fragment of bread, he said:

"Tomorrow we shall learn something."

Tomorow! The twenty-four hours that separated the young man from the decisive moment, seemed a century. What expedients he resorted to, in order to hasten the slow passage of time!

He explained to Father Absinthe clearly and minutely what he would have to do, and sure of being understood, and certain that he would be obeyed, he went back to his loft.

The evening seemed long, and the night interminable, for he found it impossible to close an eyelid.

He rose at day-break and saw that his prisoner was awake and was sitting on the foot of the bed. Soon he sprang up and paced restlessly to and fro. He was evidently in an unusually agitated frame of mind; he gesticulated wildly, and at intervals certain words—always the same words—escaped his lips.

"What misery! My God! what misery!" he repeated again and again.

"Ah! my boy," thought Lecoq, "you are anxious about the daily letter which you failed to receive. Patience, patience! One of my writing will soon arrive."

At last the young detective heard the stir that always preceded the distribution of food. People were running to and fro, *sabots* clicked noisily in the corridors, the guards were talking loudly.

Eleven o'clock was sounded by the old clock; the prisoner began his song:

"Diogene
Sous ton manteau,
Libre et content——"

He did not finish the third line; the slight sound caused by the fragment of bread as it fell upon the stone floor, made him pause suddenly.

Lecoq, at the opening in the ceiling above, was holding his breath, and watching with all his eyes.

He did not miss a single movement of the prisoner—not so much as the quiver of an eyelid.

May looked first at the window, then all about him, as if it were impossible for him to explain the arrival of this projectile.

It was not until some little time had elapsed that he decided to pick it up. He held it in the hollow of his hand, and examined it with apparent curiosity His features expressed the most profound surprise. One would have sworn that he was innocent of all complicity.

Soon a smile appeared upon his lips. With a slight shrug of the shoulders, which might be interpreted: "Am I a fool?" and with a rapid movement, he broke open the morsel of bread. The sight of the paper which it contained seemed to amaze him.

"What does all this mean?" wondered Lecoq,

The prisoner had opened the note, and was examining, with knitted brows, the figures which were apparently destitute of all meaning to him.

Then suddenly he rushed to the door of his cell, and, hammering upon it with his fists, he cried:

"Here! guard! here!"

A keeper came running, in answer to the summons. Lecoq heard his footsteps in the corridor.

"What do you want?" the man cried, through the opening in the cell door.

"I wish to speak to the judge."

"Very well. He shall be informed."

"Immediately, if you please. I wish to make some revelations."

"He shall be sent for immediately."

Lecoq waited to hear no more.

He tore down the narrow staircase leading from the loft, and rushed to the Palais de Justice to tell M. Segmuller what had happened.

"What can this mean?" he wondered, as he went. "Are we indeed approaching a *denouement?* This much is certain, the prisoner was not deceived by my note. He could decipher it only with the aid of his volume of 'Beranger;' he has not touched the book, therefore he has not read the note."

M. Segmuller was no less amazed than the young detective. Together they hastened to the prison, followed by the clerk, who was the judge's inevitable shadow.

They had reached the end of the Galerie d'Instruction, when they encountered the keeper, who was coming all in a flutter, greatly excited by that important word, "revelation."

The worthy official undoubtedly wished to make known his opinion; but the judge checked him by saying:

"I know all about it; and I am coming."

When they had reached the narrow

corridor leading to the secret cells, Lecoq passed on in advance of the rest of the party.

He said to himself that by stealing upon him unawares, he might possibly find the prisoner engaged in surreptitiously reading the note; and that, in any case, he would have an opportunity to glance at the interior of the cell.

May was seated by the table, his head resting upon his hands.

At the grating of the bolt, drawn by the hand of the headkeeper himself, he rose, smoothed his hair, and remained standing in a respectful attitude, apparently waiting for the visitors to address him.

"Did you send for me?" inquired the judge.

"Yes, monsieur."

"You have, I understand, some revelation to make to me. '

"I have something of importance to tell you."

"Very well! these gentlemen will retire."

M. Segmuller had already turned to Lecoq and the keeper to request them to withdraw, when a movement from the prisoner checked his words.

"It is not necessary," May remarked; "I am, on the contrary, very well pleased to speak before everybody."

"Speak, then."

May did not oblige him to repeat the order. He assumed a three-quarters position, inflated his chest, threw his head back, as he had done from the very beginning of his examinations when he wished to make a display of his eloquence.

"It shall be for you to say, gentlemen, whether I am or am not, an honest man. The profession matters little. One can, perhaps, be the clown of a traveling show, and yet be an honest man—a man of honor."

"Oh, spare us your reflections!"

"Very well, monsieur, that suits me exactly. To be brief, then, here is a little paper which was thrown into my cell a few moments ago. There are numbers upon it which may mean something; but I have examined it, and it is all Greek to me."

He handed it to the judge, and added:

"It was rolled up in a bit of bread."

The violence of this unexpected blow struck his visitors dumb; but the prisoner, without seeming to notice the effect he had produced, continued:

"I suppose that the person who threw it, made a mistake in the window. I know very well that it is a mean piece of business to denounce a companion in prison. It is cowardly; and one is very likely to get himself into trouble; but a man must be prudent, when he is accused of being an assassin as I am, and when he is threatened with a great unpleasantness."

A terribly significant gesture of severing the head from the body left no doubt whatever of what he meant by an unpleasantness.

"And yet I am innocent," he murmured.

The judge, by this time, had recovered the full possession of his faculties. He concentrated in one glance all the power of his will, and looking intently at the prisoner:

"You lie!" he said, slowly; "it was for you that this note was intended."

"For me! Then I must be the greatest of fools, or why should I have called you to show it to you? For me? In that case, why did I not keep it? Who knew, who could know that I had received it?"

All this was said with such a marvelous semblance of honesty, his gaze was so frank and open, his voice rang so true, his reasoning was so specious, that the keeper's doubts returned.

"And what if I could prove that you are uttering a falsehood?" insisted M. Segmuller. "What if I could prove it—here and now?"

"You would be the liar! Oh! monsieur, pardon! Excuse me; I mean———"

But the judge was not in a frame of mind to stickle for nicety of expression.

He motioned May to be silent; and, turning to Lecoq, he said:

"Show the prisoner that you have discovered the key to his secret correspondence."

A sudden change passed over the features of the accused.

"Ah! it is this agent of police who has found it," he said, in an altered tone. "The same agent who assures me that I am a grand seigneur."

He turned disdainfully to Lecoq, and added:

"Under these circumstances there is no help for me. When the police are absolutely determined that a man shall be guilty, it will be proved that he is guilty; everybody knows that. And when a prisoner receives no letters, an agent, who wishes such to be the case, knows how to send them to him."

There was such an expression of contempt upon the prisoner's face, that Lecoq could scarcely refrain from making an angry reply.

He restrained this desire, however, in obedience to a warning gesture from the judge, and taking from the table the volume of Beranger, he endeavored to prove to the prisoner that each number in the note corresponded to a word on the page indicated, and that all these words formed an intelligible whole.

This overpowering evidence did not seem to trouble May in the least. After

expressing the same admiration for this novel system of correspondence that a child would show for a new toy, he declared his belief that no one could equal the police in such machinations.

What could one do in the face of such obstinacy?

M. Segmuller did not even attempt to argue the point, and retired, followed by his companions.

Until they reached the superintendent's office, he did not utter a word; then he threw himself down into an arm-chair, saying:

"We must confess ourselves beaten. This man will always remain what he is now—an enigma."

"But what is the meaning of the comedy he has just played? I do not understand it," said the keeper.

"Why," responded Lecoq, "do you not see that he hoped to persuade the judge that the first note had been written by me, in order to convince him of the truth of my theory? It was a hazardous project; but the importance of the result to be gained must have emboldened him to attempt it. Had he succeeded, I should have been disgraced; and he would have remained May—without further molestation, in the eyes of the world. But how could he know that I had discovered his correspondence, and that I was watching him from the loft above? That is something which will never be explained, probably."

The keeper and the detective exchanged glances of mutual distrust.

"Eh! eh!" thought the director, "why, indeed, might not that note which fell at my feet the other day have been the work of this crafty fellow? His Father Absinthe might have served him in the first instance as well as he did in the last."

"Who knows," Lecoq was saying to himself, "but what this worthy keeper has confided everything to Gevrol? If he has, my jealous General would not scruple to play me such a trick as this."

"Ah!" exclaimed Goquet, "it is really a pity that such a well-mounted comedy did not succeed."

These words startled the judge from his reverie.

"A shameful farce," he said, "and one that I would never have authorized, had I not been blinded by a mad longing to arrive at the truth. It brings the sacred majesty of justice into contempt to make her the accomplice of such base subterfuges!"

Lecoq, on hearing these words, became white with wrath, and a tear of rage glittered in his eye.

It was the second affront within an hour. Insulted, first by the prisoner, afterwards by the judge.

"I am defeated," thought he. "I must confess it. It is Fate! Ah! if I had but succeeded!"

Disappointment alone had impelled M. Segmuller to utter these harsh words; they were harsh and unjust; he regretted them, and did all in his power to make Lecoq forget them.

For they met every day after this unfortunate incident; and every morning, when the young detective came to give an account of his investigations, they had a long conference.

For Lecoq still continued his efforts; still labored with an obstinacy intensified by constant sneers; still pursued his investigations with that cold and determined anger which keeps one's faculties on the alert for years.

But the judge was utterly discouraged.

"We must abandon this attempt," said he. "All the means of detection have been exhausted. I give it up. The prisoner will go to the Court of Assizes, and will be acquitted or condemned under the name of May. I will trouble myself no more about the affair."

He *said* this, but his anxiety, the disappointment caused by his defeat, the sarcastic remarks of his acquaintances, and his perplexity in regard to the course he had best pursue, so affected his health that he became really ill—so ill that he was confined to his bed.

Eight days had elapsed since he had left his house, when one morning Lecoq called to inquire for him.

"You see, my good fellow, that this mysterious murderer is fatal to us judges. Ah! he is too much for us; he will preserve his identity."

"Possibly," replied Lecoq. "There is but one way left to gain his secret: we must allow him to escape—and then track him to his lair.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THIS last expedient, proposed by Lecoq, was not of his own invention, and not by any means new.

In every age, the police-force has, when it became necessary to do so, closed its eyes and opened the prison doors for the release of suspected parties.

And not a few, dazzled by liberty and ignorance of any *espionage*, betray themselves.

All the prisoners are not, like Lavalette, protected by royal connivance; and we might enumerate many individuals who like the unfortunate Georges d'Etcherony, have been released, only to be re-arrested, when they have made a confession of guilt to those who had wormed themselves into their confidence.

Poor D'Etcherony! He supposed that

he had eluded the vigilance of his guardians. When he discovered his error, and became aware of the mistake he had made, he sent a bullet through his own heart.

Alas! he survived this terrible wound long enough to learn that one of his own familiar friends had betrayed him, and to cast in his teeth the insulting word "traitor!"

It is, however, very seldom, and only in special cases, and as a last resort, that such a plan is adopted.

And the authorities consent to it only when they hope to derive some important advantage, such as the capture of a whole band of malefactors.

The police arrest, perhaps, one of the band. In spite of his wickedness, a sense of honor makes him, not unfrequently, refuse to name his accomplices. What is to be done? Is he alone to be tried and condemned?

No. He is set at liberty; but like the falcon who flies away with a thread attached to his foot, he drags after him at the end of his chain a crowd of close observers.

And at the very moment when he is boasting of his good luck and audacity to the comrades he has rejoined, the whole company find themselves caught in the snare.

M. Segmuller knew all this, and much more; yet on hearing Lecoq's proposition, he turned to him angrily, and exclaimed:

"Are you mad?"

"I think not."

"A most foolish scheme!"

"Why so, monsieur? After the assassination of the husband and wife Chaboiseau, the police succeeded in capturing the guilty parties, you must recollect. But a robbery of one hundred and fifty thousand francs in bank-notes and coin had also been committed. This large sum of money could not be found; and the murderers obstinately refused to divulge where they had concealed it. It would be a fortune for them, if they escaped the gallows; but, meanwhile, the children of the victims were ruined. M. Patrigent, the judge of instruction, was the first—I will not say to counsel—but to succeed in convincing the authorities that it would be well to set one of these wretches at liberty. They followed his advice; and three days later the culprit was surprised disinterring his booty from a bed of mushrooms. I believe that our prisoner——"

"Enough!" interrupted M. Segmuller. "I wish to hear no more about this affair. I have, it seems to me, forbidden you to broach the subject."

The young detective hung his head with a hypocritical air of submission.

But he was all the while watching the judge out of the corner of his eye and noting his agitation.

"I can afford to be silent," he thought; "he will return to the subject of his own accord."

He did, in fact, return to it only a moment afterwards.

"Suppose this man was released from prison, what would you do?"

"What would I do, monsieur! I would follow him like grim death; I would not let him go out of my sight; I would live in his shadow."

"And do you suppose that he would not discover this surveillance!"

"I should take my precautions."

"He would recognize you at a single glance."

"No, monsieur, because I shall disguise myself. A detective who is not capable of equalling the most skilful actor in the matter of make-up is no better than an ordinary policeman. I have practiced only for a year in making my face and my person whatever I wish them to be; but I can, at will, be old or young, dark or light, a man of the world, or the most frightful ruffian of the *barrieres*."

"I was not aware that you possessed this talent, Monsieur Lecoq."

"Oh! I am very far from the perfection of which I dream. I venture to engage, however, that before three days have elapsed, I can appear before you and converse with you for half an hour without being recognized.

M. Segmuller made no response; and it was evident to Lecoq that the judge had offered these objections in the hope of seeing them destroyed, rather than with the wish to see them prevail.

"I think, my poor boy, that you are strangely deceived. We have both been equally anxious to penetrate the mystery that shrouds this strange man. We have both admired his wonderful acuteness—for his sagacity *is* wonderful; so marvellous, indeed, that it exceeds the limits of imagination. Do you believe that a man of his penetration will betray himself like an ordinary prisoner? He will understand at once, if he is set at liberty, that his freedom is given him only that we may use it against him."

"I do not deceive myself, sir. May will divine the truth. I know that but too well."

"Very well; then what will be the use of attempting what you propose?"

"I have reflected on the subject, and have come to this conclusion: This man will find himself strangely embarrassed, even when he is free. He will not have a sou in his pocket; he has no trade. What will he do to make a living? But one must eat. He may struggle along for a while; but he will not be willing to suffer long. Days when he is without a shelter, and without a morsel of bread,

he will remember that he is rich. Will he not seek to recover his property? Yes, certainly. He will try to obtain money; he will endeavor to communicate with his friends. I shall wait until that day comes. Months will elapse, and seeing no sign of my surveillance, he will venture some decisive step; and I will step forward with a warrant for his arrest in my hand."

"And what if he should leave Paris? What if he should flee to some foreign country?"

"I will follow him. One of my aunts has left me a small country property, that is worth about twelve thousand francs. I will sell it, and I will spend the last sou, if necessary, in pursuit of my revenge. This man has outwitted me as if I were a child, and I will have my turn."

"And what if he should slip through your fingers."

Lecoq laughed like a man who was sure of himself.

"Let him try," he exclaimed: "I will answer for him with my life."

Unfortunately, Lecoq's enthusiasm made the judge all the colder.

"Your idea is a good one, sir," he responded. "But you must understand that law and justice will take no part in such intrigues. All I can promise you is my tacit approval. Go, therefore, to the prefecture; see your superiors——"

With a really despairing gesture, the young man interrupted M. Segmuller.

"What good would it do for me to make such a proposition?" he exclaimed. "They would not only refuse my request, but they would give me my dismissal, if my name is not already erased from the roll."

"You dismissed, your name erased after you have conducted this case so well?"

"Alas! sir, every one is not of that opinion. Tongues have been wagging busily during the week of your illness. My enemies have heard somehow of the last scene we had with May. Ah, yes! that man is very clever. They all say now that it was *I.* who, with a hope of advancement, imagined all the romantic details of this affair. They declare that there can be no doubt of the prisoner's identity except those of my own invention. To hear them talk at the depot one might suppose that I invented the scene that took place in the Widow Chupin's cabin; imagined the accomplices; suborned the witnesses; manufactured the articles found in the dwelling; wrote that first note as well as the second; duped Father Absinthe, and mystified the keeper."

"The devil!" exclaimed M. Segmuller; "in that case what do they think of me?"

The wily detective's face assumed an expression of intense embarrassment.

"Ah! sir," he replied, with a great show of reluctance, "they pretend that you have allowed yourself to be deceived by me, that you have not properly weighed the proofs which I have adduced."

A fleeting crimson tinged M. Segmuller's forehead.

"In a word," said he, "they think I am your dupe—and a fool."

The recollection of certain smiles that he had encountered in passing through the corridors, and of divers allusions which had stung him to the quick, decided him.

"Very well! I will aid you, Monsieur Lecoq," he exclaimed. "I would like you to triumph over your enemies. I will get up at once, and accompany you to the palace. I will see the attorney-general myself; I will speak to him; I will plead your cause for you."

Lecoq's joy was intense.

Never, no never, had he dared hope to obtain such aid.

Ah! after this, M. Segmuller might ask him to go through fire for him if he chose, and he would be ready to precipitate himself into the flames.

Still he was prudent enough, and he had sufficient control over his feelings, to preserve a sober face. This was one of the victories that must be concealed, under penalty of losing all the benefits to be derived from it.

Certainly the young detective had said nothing that was untrue; but there are different ways of presenting the truth, and he had, perhaps, exaggerated a trifle in order to make the judge share his rancor, and make him an earnest auxiliary. M. Segmuller, however, after the exclamation wrested from him by his adroitly wounded vanity—after the first explosion of anger—regained his accustomed calmness.

"I suppose," he remarked to Lecoq, "that you have decided what stratagem must be employed to lull the prisoner's suspicions in case he is perm tted to escape."

"I have not once thought of that, I must confess. Besides, what good would any such stratagem do? That man knows too well that he is the object of suspicion and anxious surveillance not to hold himself on the *qui vive*. But there is one precaution which I believe is absolutely necessary, indispensable indeed. In fact, it appears to me an essential condition of success."

Lecoq seemed to find so much difficulty in choosing his words, that the judge felt it necessary to aid him.

"Let me hear this precaution," said he.

"It consists, sir, in giving an order to transfer May to another prison. Oh! it

matters not which one, any one you choose to select."

"Why, if you please?"

"Because, during the few days that precede his release, it is absolutely necessary that he should hold no communication with his friends outside, and that he should be unable to warn his accomplice."

This proposition seemed to amaze M. Segmuller exceedingly.

"Then you think that he is poorly guarded where he is?" he inquired.

"No, monsieur, I did not say that. I am persuaded that since the affair of the note the keeper has redoubled his vigilance. But still, where he is now, this mysterious murderer certainly receives news from outside; we have had material evidence—unanswerable proofs of that fact—and besides——"

He paused, evidently fearing to give expression to his thought, like a person who feels that what he is about to say will be regarded as an enormity.

"And besides?" insisted the judge.

"Ah, well, sir! I will be perfectly frank with you. I find that Gevrol enjoys too much liberty in the depot; he is perfectly at home there; he comes and goes, and no one ever thinks of asking what he is doing, where he is going, or what he wishes there. No pass is necessary for his admission, and he can make the head-keeper, who is a very honest man, see stars in the heavens at mid-day if he chooses. And I distrust Gevrol."

"Oh! Monsieur Lecoq!"

"Yes, I know very well that it is a bold accusation, but a man is not master of his presentiments, and I distrust Gevrol. Did the prisoner know or did he *not* know, that I was watching him from the loft, and that I had discovered his secret correspondence? Evidently he did know this; the last scene with him proves it."

"Such is also my opinion."

"But how could he have known it? He could not have discovered it unaided. For eight days I endured tortures to find the solution of this problem. All my trouble was wasted. Gevrol's intervention would explain it all."

M. Segmuller, at the mere suppostion, turned pale with anger."

Ah! if I could really believe that!" he exclaimed; "if I were sure of it! Have you any proofs?"

The young man shook his head.

"If I had my hands full of proofs I should know enough not to open them. Would it not ruin my whole future? I must, if I succeed, expect many such acts of treachery. There is hatred and rivalry in every profession? And mark this, monsieur—I do not doubt Gevrol's honesty. If a hundred thousand francs were counted out upon the table and offered to him, he would not release a prisoner. But he would rob justice of a dozen criminals in the mere hope of injuring me, whom he thinks likely to overshadow him."

How many things these words explained! To how many unsolved enigmas did they give the key! But the judge had not time to follow out this course of thought.

"That will do," said he, "go into the drawing-room for a moment. "I will dress and join you there. I will send for a carriage; I must make haste if I wish to see the procureur-general to-day."

Usually very particular about the minutiæ of his toilette, this morning the judge was dressed and in the drawing-room in less than quarter of an hour.

As soon as he entered the apartment where Lecoq was impatiently awaiting him, he said, briefly:

"Let us start."

They were just entering the carriage, when a man, whose handsome livery proclaimed him a servitor in an aristocratic household, hastily approached M. Segmuller.

"Ah! Jean, is it you?" said the judge. "How is your master."

Improving, monsieur. He sent me to ask how you were, and to inquire how that affair was progressing?"

"There has been no change in that since I wrote him last. Give him my compliments, and tell him that I am out again."

The servant bowed. Lecoq took a seat beside the judge, and the *fiacre* started.

"That fellow is D'Escorval's *valet de chambre*," remarked M. Segmuller.

"The judge who——"

"Precisely. He sent his man to me two or three days ago, to ascertain what we were doing with our mysterious May."

"Then M. d'Escorval is interested in the case?"

"Prodigiously! I conclude it is because he opened the prosecution, and because the case rightfully belongs to him. Perhaps he regrets that it passed out of his hands, and thinks that he could have managed the *instruction* better himself. We would have done better with it, if we could. I would give a good deal to see him in my place."

But this change would not have been at all to Lecoq's taste.

"That stern and forbidding judge would never have granted the concessions I have just obtained from M. Segmuller," he thought.

He had, indeed, good reason to congratulate himself; for M. Segmuller did not break his promise. He was one of those men who, when they have once decided upon a plan, never rest until it has been carried into execution.

That very day he induced the authorities to adopt Lecoq's suggestion; and the details only remained to be decided upon.

That same afternoon, the Widow Chupin received her conditional release.

There was no difficulty in regard to Polyte. He, in the meantime, had been brought before the court under a charge of theft; and, to his great astonishment, had heard himself condemned to thirteen months' imprisoment.

After this M. Segmuller had nothing to do but to wait, and this was much more easy to do, since the coming of the Easter holidays gave him an opportunity to seek a little rest and recreation in the provinces, with his family.

He returned to Paris on the last day of the recess, which chanced to fall on Sunday, and he was sitting quietly in his own drawing-room, when a servant—who had been sent by the employment bureau to take the place of one whom he had dismissed—was announced.

The new-comer was a man apparently about forty years of age, very red in the face, with thick hair and heavy red whiskers—strongly inclined to corpulence, and clad in clumsy, ill-fitting garments.

In a very sedate manner, and with a strong Norman accent, he informed the judge that during the past twenty years he had been in the employ of literary men—a physician, and a notary; that he was familiar with the duties that would be required of him in the Palais de Justice, and that he knew how to dust papers without disarranging them.

In short, the man produced such a favorable impression, that although he reserved twenty-four hours in which to make further inquiries, the judge drew from his pocket a louis, and tendered it to him as the first installment of his wages.

But the man, with a sudden change of voice and attitude, burst into a hearty laugh, and said:

"Monsieur, do you think that May will recognize me?"

"Monsieur Lecoq!" exclaimed the astonished judge.

"The same, sir; and I have come to tell you that if you are ready to release May, all my arrangements have been completed."

CHAPTER XXXV.

When a judge connected with the tribunal of the Seine wishes to examine a person incarcerated in one of the prisons, the following forms are observed:

He first sends his messenger with what is called an order of extraction, an imperative and concise formula, which we quote, in order to give some idea of the unlimited power vested in the magistrates who are entrusted with the preparation of cases for the government.

It reads thus:

"The keeper of the ——— prison will give into the custody of the bearer of this order, the prisoner known as———, in order that he may be brought before us in our cabinet in the Palais de Justice."

No more, no less, a signature, a seal, and everybody hastens to obey.

But from the moment of receiving this order to the time that the prisoner is again consigned to the keeping of the jailer, the superintendent of the prison is relieved of all responsibility. Whatever may happen, his hands are clean.

So the journey of the prisoner from the prison to the palace is usually attended with an infinite number of precautions.

They place the prisoner in one of the lugubrious vehicles that one sees stationed every day on the Quai de l'Horloge, or the court of the Sainte-Chapelle, locking him up carefully in one of the compartments.

This vehicle conveys him to the palace, and while he is awaiting his examination, he is immured in one of the cells of that gloomy prison, familiarly known as "la Souriciere"—the mouse-trap.

On entering and leaving the carriage the prisoner is surrounded by guards.

En route he is also under the watchful eye of several guards, some of them stationed in the passage-way that divides the compartments, others on the seat with the driver.

Mounted guards always accompany the vehicle.

So the boldest malefactors realize the impossibility of escape from this moving prison-house.

The statistics show only thirty attempts at escape in a period of ten years.

Of these thirty attempts, twenty-five were ridiculous failures. Four were discovered before their authors had conceived any serious hope of success. One man alone succeeded in making his escape from the vehicle, and he had not gone fifty steps before he was captured.

He accepted, boldly, perhaps, but not blindly, the struggle that must ensue.

"But," thought Lecoq, "if he decides to incur these risks he must be reasonably sure that he will succeed in overcoming them."

Such a belief on the part of May was a grave subject of fear for the young detective; but it also gave rise to a delightful emotion. He had an ambition beyond his station; and every ambitious man is by nature a gambler.

He felt that his foeman was worthy of his steel; that they had equal chances for success.

Lecoq's plan for allowing May to escape was childish in its simplicity, as he himself confessed. It consisted in fastening the compartment in which May was placed very insecurely, on the departure of the carriage from the depot, and in forgetting him entirely when the wagon, after depositing its load of criminals at the "mouse-trap," went, as usual, to await upon the quay the hour for returning them to the prison.

It was scarcely possible that the prisoner would fail to embrace this opportunity to make his escape.

All was, therefore, prepared and arranged, in conformance with Lecoq's directions, on the day indicated—the Monday following the close of the Easter holidays.

"The order of "extraction" was intrusted to an intelligent man, with the most minute instructions.

The prison-van containing the prisoner May, would not arrive at the palace until noon.

And yet at nine o'clock there might have been seen hanging about the prefecture one of those old *gamins*, who make one almost believe in the fable of Venus rising from the waves, so truly do they seem born of the foam and scum of the city.

He was clad in a tattered black woolen blouse, and in large, ill-fitting trousers, fastened about his waist by a leather band. His boots betrayed a familiar acquaintance with the mud-puddles of the suburbs, his cap was shabby and dirty; but his pretentiously-tied red-silk cravat must have been a gift from his sweetheart.

He had the unhealthy complexion, the hollow eyes, the slouching mien, the straggling beard common to his tribe.

His yellow hair was plastered down upon his temples, but cut closely at the back of the head, as if to save the trouble of brushing it.

On seeing his attire, the way in which he balanced himself upon his haunches, the movement of his shoulders, his way of holding his cigarette and of ejecting a stream of saliva from between his teeth, Polyte Chupin would have extended his hand as to a friend, and greeted him as "comrade" and "pal."

It was the 14th of April; the day was lovely, the air balmy, the tops of the chestnut trees in the garden of the Tuileries looked green against the horizon, and this man seemed well content to be alive, and happy in doing nothing.

He walked lazily to and fro on the quay, dividing his attention between the passers-by and the men who were hauling sand from the banks of the Seine.

Occasionally he crossed the street and exchanged a few words with a respectable elderly gentleman, very neatly dressed, and wearing spectacles and a very long beard, his hands encased in silk gloves. This person exhibited all the characteristics of a respectable, well-to-do gentleman, and seemed to feel a remarkable curiosity in regard to the contents of an optician's window.

From time to time a policeman or one of the detective corps passed them on his way to make his report; and the elderly gentleman or the *gamin* often ran after him to ask some information.

The person addressed replied and passed on; and then the two confreres joined each other to laugh and say:

"Good!—there is another who does not recognize us."

And they had just cause for exultation; and good reason to be proud.

Of the twelve or fifteen comrades whom they had accosted, not one had recognized their colleagues, Lecoq and Father Absinthe.

For it was indeed they, armed and equipped for the chase, for the pursuit whose chances and result it was impossible to foresee.

"Ah! I am not surprised that they do not recognize me," said Father Absinthe, "since I cannot recognize myself. No one but you, Monsieur Lecoq, could have so transformed me."

But the time for reflection was past; the time for action had come.

The young detective saw the prison van crossing the bridge at a brisk trot.

"Attention!" he said to his companion, "there comes our friend! Quick—to your post; remember my directions, and keep your eyes open!"

Near them, on the quay, was a huge pile of timber. Father Absinthe went and hid himself behind it; and Lecoq, seizing a spade that was lying idle, hurried to a little distance and began digging in the sand.

They did well to make haste. The van came onward and turned the corner.

It passed the two men, and with a noisy clang rolled under the heavy arch that led to "la Souriciere."

May was inside.

Lecoq was sure of this when he saw the keeper, who was seated in the vehicle.

The carriage remained in the courtyard for more than a quarter of an hour.

When it reappeared in the street, the driver had descended from his seat and was leading the horses by the bridle. He stationed the carriage opposite the Palais de Justice, threw a covering over his horses, lighted his pipe, and walked away.

For a moment the anxiety of the two watchers amounted to actual agony; nothing stirred—nothing moved.

But at last the door of the carriage was opened with infinite caution, and a pale,

frightened face became visible. It was the face of May.

The prisoner cast a rapid glance around; no one was in sight.

With the quickness of a cat, he sprang to the ground, noiselessly closed the door of the vehicle, and walked quietly in the direction of the bridge.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LECOQ breathed again.

He had been asking himself if some trifling circumstance could have been forgotten or neglected, and thus disarranged all his plans.

He had been wondering if this strange man would refuse the dangerous liberty which had been offered him.

"Foolish disquietude! May had fled; not thoughtlessly, but premeditatedly.

From the moment when he was left alone and apparently forgotten in the insecurely locked compartment, to the instant when he opened the door, sufficient time had elapsed to give a man of his intellect and clearness of discernment ample opportunity to analyze and calculate all the chances of so grave a step.

Hence, if he stepped into the snare that had been laid for him, it would be with a full knowledge of the risks he must be prepared to run.

They were alone together, free in the streets of Paris, armed with mutual distrust, obliged alike to resort to strategy, forced to hide from each other.

Lecoq, it is true, had an auxiliary—Father Absinthe. But who could say that May would not be aided by his redoubtable accomplice?

It was then a veritable duel, whose result depended entirely upon the courage, skill and coolness of the antagonists.

All these thoughts flashed through the young man's brain with the quickness of lightning.

He threw down his spade, and running to a policeman, who was just coming out of the palace, he gave him a letter which he held ready in his pocket.

"Take this to M. Segmuller, at once; it is a matter of importance," said he.

The officer attempted to question this *gamin* who was in correspondence with the magistrates; but Lecoq had already darted off in the footsteps of the prisoner.

May had gone only a little distance. He was sauntering along, with his hands in his pockets, his head high in the air, his manner composed and full of assurance.

Had he reflected that it would be dangerous to run while near the prison from which he had just made his escape? Or had he decided that, since they had given him this opportunity to escape, there was no danger that they would arrest him immediately?

Nor did he quicken his pace when he had crossed the bridge; and it was with the same tranquil manner that he had crossed the Quai aux Fleurs and turned into the Rue de la Cite.

Nothing in his bearing or appearance proclaimed him an escaped prisoner. Since his trunk—that famous trunk which he pretended to have left at the Hotel de Mariembourg—had been returned to him, he had been well supplied with clothing; and he never failed, when summoned before the judge, to array himself in his best apparel.

He wore that day, a coat, vest, and pantaloons of black cloth. One, to see him, would have supposed him a working man of the better class, off on a holiday excursion.

But when, after crossing the Seine, he reached the Rue St. Jacques, his manner changed. His tread, perfectly assured until then, became uncertain. He walked slowly, looking to the right and to the left, studying the signs.

"Evidently he is seeking something," thought Lecoq; "but what?"

It was not long before he discovered.

Seeing a shop where second-hand clothing was sold, May entered in evident haste.

Lecoq stationed himself in a *porte cochere* on the opposite side of the street, and pretended to be busily engaged lighting a cigarette! Father Absinthe thought he could approach without danger.

"Ah, well, monsieur; here is our man changing his fine clothing for coarser garments. He will demand money in return; and they will give it to him. You told me this morning: 'May without a *sou*'—that is the trump card in our game!"

"Nonsense! Before we begin to lament, let us wait and see what will happen. It is not likely that the shopkeeper will give him the money. He will not buy clothing of every passer-by."

Father Absinthe withdrew to a little distance. He distrusted these reasons, but not Lecoq who gave them to him. In his secret soul Lecoq was cursing himself.

Another blunder; another weapon left in the hands of the enemy. How was it that he, who thought himself so shrewd, had not foreseen this?"

His remorse was less poignant when he saw May emerge from the store as he had entered it.

Luck, of which he had spoken to Father Absinthe, without believing in it, had for once been in his favor.

The prisoner actually staggered when he stepped out upon the pavement. His countenance betrayed the terrible anguish

of a drowning man when he sees the frail plank which was his only hope of salvation torn from his grasp.

He gave a peculiar whistle, which was the signal agreed upon to warn his companion that he abandoned the pursuit to him; and having received a similar signal in response, he entered the shop.

But what had taken place? Lecoq wished to know.

The merchant was still standing at his counter. Lecoq wasted no time in parleying. He merely showed his card to acquaint the man with his profession, and curtly demanded the desired information.

"What did the man want who just left here?"

The merchant seemed troubled.

"It is a long story," he stammered.

"Tell it!" ordered Lecoq, surprised at the man's embarrassment.

"Oh, it is very simple. About twelve days ago, a man entered my store with a bundle under his arm. He claimed that he was a countryman of mine."

"Are you an Alsatian?"

"Yes, sir. Well, I went with this man to the wine shop on the corner, where he ordered a bottle of the best wine; and when we had drank together, he asked me if I would consent to keep the package he had with him until one of his cousins came to claim it. To prevent any mistake, this cousin was to utter certain words—a countersign, as it were, I refused, shortly and decidedly, for the very month before I had gotten into trouble, and had been accused of receiving stolen goods, by obliging a person in this same way. Well, you never saw a man so vexed and so surprised. What made me all the more determined in my refusal was that he offered me a good round sum in payment for my trouble. This only increased my suspicions, and I persisted in my refusal."

He paused to take breath; but Lecoq was on fire with impatience.

"And what then?" he insisted.

"Afterwards the man paid for the wine, and went away. I had forgotten all about the occurrence, until this man came in just now, and asked me if I had not a package for him, which had been left here by one of his cousins, whereupon he uttered some peculiar words—the countersign, doubtless. When I replied that I had nothing, he turned as white as his shirt; and I thought that he was going to faint. All my suspicions returned. So when he proposed that I should buy his clothing—no; I thank you."

All this was very plain.

"And how did this cousin look who was here a fortnight ago?" inquired the detective.

"He was a large, and rather corpulent man, with a ruddy complexion, and white whiskers. Ah! I should recognize him in an instant!"

"The accomplice!" exclaimed Lecoq.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing that would interest you. Thank you. I am in a hurry. You will see me again; good morning."

Lecoq had not remained in the store five minutes; yet, when he emerged, May and Father Absinthe were nowhere to be seen.

But this did not occasion any uneasiness in Lecoq's mind.

When making arrangements with his old colleague for this pursuit the detective had endeavored to imagine all possible difficulties in order to solve them in advance.

The present situation had been forseen. And it had been agreed that if one of the observers was obliged to remain behind, the other, who was closely following May, should make chalk marks from time to time upon the walls, and upon the shutters of the shops, which would indicate the route to be followed, and enable his companion to rejoin him.

So, in order to know which way to go, Lecoq had only to examine the fronts of the buildings around him.

This task was neither long nor difficult.

Upon the shutters of the third shop above that of the second-hand clothes dealer, a superb dash of the crayon told Lecoq to turn into the Rue Sainte-Jacques.

The detective rushed on in that direction, greatly disquieted.

His assurance of the morning had received a rude shock!

What a terrible warning that old clothes dealer's declaration had been!

And so it was an established fact that the mysterious and redoubtable accomplice had proved his marvelous foresight by making every possible arrangement to ensure his companion's salvation, in case he was allowed to escape.

The subtle penetration of this man surpassed the pretended miracles of clairvoyants.

"What did this package contain?" thought Lecoq. "Clothing, undoubtedly; all the equipments of a complete disguise, money, clothing, papers, a forged passport."

He had reached the Rue Soufflot, and paused for an instant to ask his way from the walls.

It was the work of a second. A long chalk-mark on the shop of a watchmaker pointed to the Boulevard Saint-Michel.

The young man hastened in that direction.

"The accomplice," he continued, "did not succeed in his attempt in the case of the old clothes dealer; but he is not the man to be disheartened by one rebuff.

He has certainly taken other measures. How shall I divine them, in order to circumvent them?"

The prisoner had crossed the Boulevard Saint-Michel, and had then taken the Rue Monsieur-le-Prince. Father Absinthe's dashes of the crayon declared this fact with many eloquent flourishes.

"One circumstance reassures me," the detective murmured; "May's going to this shop, and his consternation on finding that there was nothing for him there. The accomplice had informed him of his plans, but had *not* been able to inform him of the failure. Hence, from this hour, the prisoner is left upon his own resources. The chain that bound him to his accomplice is broken; there is no longer an understanding between them. Everything depends now upon keeping them apart. That is everything!"

How much he rejoiced that he had succeeded in having May removed to another prison. His triumph, in case he did succeed, would be the result of this act of distrust. He was convinced that this attempt, on the part of the accomplice, had taken place the very evening before May was removed to another prison; and this explained why it had been impossible to warn him of the failure of one plan and to substitute another.

Still following the chalk-marks, Lecoq had reached the Odeon. Here—more signs; but he perceived Father Absinthe under the gallery. The old man was standing before the window of a bookstore, apparently engrossed in the examination of the pictures in an illustrated journal.

Lecoq, assuming the nonchalant manner of the loafer whose garb he wore, took a place beside his colleague.

"Where is he?" the young man asked.

"There," replied his companion, with a slight movement of his head towards the staircase.

The fugitive was, indeed, seated upon one of the steps of the stone stairs, his elbows resting upon his knees, his face hidden in his hands, as if he felt the necessity of concealing the expression of his face from the passers-by.

Undoubtedly, at that moment, he gave himself up for lost. Alone, in the midst of Paris, without a penny, what was to become of him?

He knew beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he was watched; that his every step was followed; and he knew only too well that the first attempt he made to inform his accomplice of his whereabouts would cost him his secret—the secret which he held as more precious than life itself, and which, by immense sacrifices, he had thus far been able to preserve,

After contemplating in silence for some time this unfortunate man whom he could but esteem and admire, after all, Lecoq turned to his old companion.

"What did he do on the way," he enquired.

"He went into the shops of five dealers in second-hand clothing without success. Then he addressed a man who was passing with a lot of old rubbish on his shoulder; but the man would not even answer him."

Lecoq nodded his head thoughtfully.

"The moral of this is, that there is a vast difference between theory and practice," he remarked. "Here is a man who has made the most discerning believe that he is a poor devil, a low buffoon; so much as he prated of the misfortunes and the hazards of his existence—— He is free; and this so-called Bohemian does not know how to go to work to sell the clothing that he wears upon his back. The comedian who could play his part so well upon the stage, disappears; the man remains—the man who has always been rich, and who knows nothing of the vicissitudes of life."

He ceased his moralizing, for May had risen from his seat.

Lecoq was only ten paces from him, and could see him very plainly.

The wretched man's face was livid; his attitude expressed the most profound dejection; one could read his indecision in his eyes.

Perhaps he was wondering if it would not be best for him to go and place himself again in the hands of his jailers, since the resources upon which he had depended had failed him.

But, after a little, he shook off the torpor that had overpowered him; his eye brightened, and, with a gesture of defiance, he descended the staircase, crossed the open square and entered the Rue de l'Ancienne-Comedie.

He walked on now with a brisk, determined step, like a man who has an aim in view.

"Who knows where he is going now?" murmured Father Absinthe, as he trotted along by Lecoq's side.

"I know," replied the detective. "And the proof is, that I am going to leave you, and run on in advance, to prepare for his reception. I may be mistaken, however, and as it is necessary to be prepared for any emergency, leave me the chalk-marks as you go along. If our man does not come to the Hotel de Mariembourg, as I think he will, I shall come back here to start in pursuit of you again."

An empty *fiacre* chanced to be passing; Lecoq entered it and told the coachman to drive to the Northern Railway depot by the shortest route, and as quickly as possible.

He had little time to spare, so while he was on the way he profited by the

opportunity to pay the driver and to search in his note book, among the documents confined to him by M. Segmuller, for the particular paper that he wanted.

The carriage had scarcely stopped before Lecoq was on the ground and running towards the hotel.

As on the occasion of his first visit, he found Madame Milner standing upon a chair before the cage of her starling, obstinately repeating her German phrase, to which the bird with equal obstinacy responded: "Camille! where is Camille?"

In seeing the rather questionable-looking individual who invaded her hotel, the pretty widow did not deign to change her position,

"What do you want!" she demanded, in a rather discouraging tone.

"I am the nephew of a messenger in the Palais de Justice," Lecoq responded, with an awkward bow, entirely in keeping with his attire. "On going to see my uncle this morning, I found him laid up with the rheumatism; and he asked me to bring you this paper in his stead. It is a citation for you to appear at once before the judge of instruction.

This reply induced Mme. Milner to abandon her perch. She took the paper and read it. It was, indeed, as this singular messenger had said.

"Very well," she responded; "give me time to throw a shawl over my shoulder and I will obey."

Lecoq withdrew with another awkward bow; but he had not crossed the treshold before a significant grimace betrayed his inward satisfaction.

She had duped him once, now he had repaid her.

He crossed the street, and seeing on the corner of the Rue Saint-Quentin a house in process of construction, he concealed himself there, waiting.

"Time to slip on my bonnet and shawl, and I will start!"

Madame Milner had replied thus. But she was forty years of age, a widow, a blonde, very pretty, and very agreeable still, at least in the opinion of the commissioner of police in that quarter, so she required more than ten minutes to tie the strings of her blue velvet bonnet.

At the thought that May might arrive at any moment, Lecoq felt a cold perspiration issue from the pores of his entire body.

How much was he in advance of the fugitive? A half hour, perhaps! And he had accomplished only half of his task.

The shadow of each passer-by made him shudder.

At last the coquettish mistress of the hotel made her appearance as radiant as a spring morning.

She probably wished to make up for the time spent in making her toilet, for as she turned the corner she began to run.

As soon as she was out of sight, the young detective bounded from his place of concealment, and burst into the Hotel de Mariembourg like a bomb-shell.

Fritz, the Bavarian lad, must have been warned that the house was to be left in his sole charge for some hours, and—he was guarding it.

He was comfortably established in his mistress's own particular arm-chair, his legs resting upon another chair, and he was already sound asleep.

"Wake up!" shouted Lecoq; "wake up!"

At the sound of this voice, which rang like a trumpet blast, Fritz sprang to his feet frightened half out of his wits.

"You see that I am an agent of the prefecture of police," said the visitor, showing his badge, "and if you wish to avoid all sorts of disagreeable things, the least of which will be a sojourn in prison, you must obey me."

The boy trembled in every limb.

"I will obey," he stammered. "But what am I to do?"

"A very little thing. A man is coming here in a moment; you will know him by his black clothes, and by his long beard. You must reply to him word for word, as I tell you. And remember, if you make any mistake, even an involuntary one, you will suffer for it."

"You may rely upon me, sir," replied Fritz. "I have an excellent memory."

The prospect of a prison had terrified him into abject submission. He spoke the truth; one might have asked anything of him.

Lecoq profited by this disposition; and with clearness and conciseness he told the lad what he was to do.

When he had finished his explanation, he added:

"Now, I wish to see and hear. Where can I hide myself?"

Fritz pointed to a glass door.

"In the dark room there, sir. By leaving the door ajar you can hear, and you can see everything through the glass."

Without a word Lecoq darted into the room designated, for the spring-bell on the outer door announced the arrival of some visitor.

It was May.

"I desire to speak to the mistress of this hotel," he said.

"Which mistress?"

"The woman who received me when I came here six weeks ago——"

"I understand," interrupted Fritz; "it is Mme. Milner whom you wish to see. You come too late; she no longer owns this house. She sold it about a month

ago, and has returned to her former home, Alsace."

The man stamped his foot with a terrible oath.

"I have a claim to make upon her," he insisted.

"Do you wish me to call her successor?"

In his place of concealment, Lecoq could not help admiring Fritz, who was uttering these glaring falsehoods with that air of perfect candor which gives the Germans such an advantage over people of the south, who seem to be lying even when they are telling the truth.

"The successor will send me walking!" exclaimed May. "I came to reclaim the money I paid for a room which I have never used."

"Such money is never refunded."

The man muttered some incoherent threat, in which such words as "evident stealing' and "justice" could be distinguished! then he went out, slamming the door violently behind him.

"Well!" did I answer properly?" Fritz triumphantly demanded, as Lecoq emerged from his hiding place.

"Yes, perfectly," replied the detective.

And pushing aside the boy, who was standing in his way, he dashed after May.

A vague fear almost suffocated him.

It had struck him that the fugitive had not been either surprised or deeply affected by the news he had heard. He had come to the hotel depending upon Madame Milner's aid; the news of the departure of this woman, who was the confidential friend of his accomplice, might reasonably be expected to terrify him.

Had he divined the ruse that had been played upon him? And how?

His good sense told him so plainly that the fugitive must have been put on his guard that Lecoq's first question, on rejoining Father Absinthe, was:

"May spoke to some one on his way to the hotel."

"Why, how could you know that?" exclaimed the worthy man, greatly astonished.

"Ah! I was sure of it! To whom did he speak!"

"To a very pretty woman, upon my word!—fair and plump as a partridge."

Lecoq turned green with anger.

"Fate is against us!" he exciaimed with an oath. "I run on in advance to Madame Milner's house, so that May shall not see her. I invent an excuse for sending her out of the hotel, and they encounter each other.

Father Absinthe gave a despairing gesture.

"Ah! if I had known!" he murmured; "but you did not tell me to prevent May from speaking to the passers-by."

"Never mind, my old friend, said Lecoq, consolingly; "it could not have been helped."

The fugitive had reached the Faubourg Montmartre, and his pursuers were obliged to hasten forward and get closer to their man, that they might not lose him in the crowd.

When they had almost overtaken him:

"Now," resumed Lecoq, "give me the details. Where did they meet?"

"On the Rue-Saint-Quentin."

Which saw the other first?"

"May."

"What did the woman say?" Did you hear any cry of surprise!"

"I heard nothing, because I was quite fifty paces from them; but by the woman's manner, I could see that she was stupefied.

Ah! if Lecoq could have witnessed the scene, what valuable deductions he would have drawn from it!

"Did they talk for a long time?"

"For less than a quarter of an hour."

"Do you know whether Mme. Milner gave May money, or not?"

"I cannot say. They gesticulated like mad—so violently, indeed, that I thought they were quarreling."

They knew they were watched, and they were endeavoring to divert suspicion.

"If they would only arrest this woman and question her," suggested Father Absinthe.

"What good would it do? Has not M. Segmuller examined and cross-examined her a dozen times without drawing anything from her! Ah! she is a cunning one. She would declare that May met her and insisted that she should refund the ten francs that he paid her for his room. We must do our best," he continued, with a sort of resignation. "If the accomplice has not been warned already, he will soon be told, and we must try to keep the two men apart. What ruse they will employ, I cannot divine. But I know that it will be nothing hackneyed."

Lecoq's presumptions made Father Absinthe tremble.

"The surest way, perhaps, would be to lock him up again!"

"No!" replied the detective. "I desire his secret; I will have it. What will be said of us, if we two allow this man to escape us? He will not, I think, be visible and invisible by turns, like the devil. We will see what he is going to do now that he has money and a plan—for he has both at the present moment. I would stake my right hand upon it."

At that same instant, as if the prisoner intended to convince Lecoq of the truth

of his suspicions, he entered a tobacco store, and emerged, an instant afterwards, with a cigar in his mouth.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE mistress of the Hotel de Mariembourg had given May money; the purchase of this cigar proved it conclusively,

But had they agreed upon any plan? Had they had time to decide, point by point, upon the method to be employed in evading the pursuers?

It would seem so, since the conduct of the fugitive had changed in more respects than one.

Until now, he had appeared to care little for the danger of being pursued and overtaken; but after his meeting with Mme. Milner, he seemed uneasy and agitated. After walking so long in the full sunlight, with his head high in the air, he appeared to have been seized by a sort of panic; and he now slunk along in the shadow of the houses, hiding himself as much as possible.

"It is evident that the man's fears are augmented by reason of his hopes," said Lecoq to his companion. "He was totally discouraged in the Odeon; the merest trifle would have decided him to surrender himself; now he thinks he has a chance to escape with his secret."

The fugitive had followed the boulevard as far as the Place Vendome; he crossed it, and turned towards the Temple.

Soon after, Father Absinthe and his companion saw him conversing with one of those importunate merchants who consider every passer-by their lawful prey.

The dealer set a price on an article, and May feebly demurred; but he finally yielded, and disappeared in the shop.

"He has determined on a change of costume. Is it not always the first impulse of an escaped prisoner?" remarked Lecoq.

Soon May emerged from the store, metamorphosed from head to foot.

He was now clad in heavy dark-blue linen pantaloons, and a loosely fitting coat of rough woolen material. A gay silk 'kerchief was knotted about his throat; and upon his head was a soft cap with a visor: this he had perched rakishly over one ear.

Really, he was but little more prepossessing in his appearance than Lecoq himself. One would have hesitated before deciding which of the two men one would prefer to meet in the depths of a lonely forest.

He seemed content with his transformation, and appeared more at ease in his new attire. There was evident suspicion in the glance he cast around him, as if he were endeavoring to discover which persons among the crowd were charged with watching him, and wresting his secret from him.

He had not parted with his broadcloth suit; he was carrying it under his arm, wrapped in a handkerchief. He had bought, but had not sold: he had diminished his capital, and not augmented it. He had left only his tall silk hat.

Lecoq wished to enter the store and make some inquiries; but he felt that it would be an act of imprudence on his part, for May had settled his cap upon his head with a gesture that left no doubt of his intentions.

A second after he turned into the Rue du Temple. Now the chase began in earnest; and soon the two pursuers had all they could do to follow their man, who seemed endowed with the agility of a deer.

May had probably lived in England and in Germany, since he spoke the language of these countries like a native; but one thing was certain—he knew Paris as thoroughly as the oldest Parisian.

This was demonstrated by the way in which he dashed into the Rue des Gravilliers, and the precision of his course through the multitude of winding streets that lie between the Rue du Temple and the Rue Beaubourg.

He seemed to know this quarter perfectly; as well, indeed, as if he had spent half his life there. He knew all the public houses that had two outside doors—all the by-ways and tortuous lanes.

Twice he almost escaped his pursuers; once his salvation hung upon a thread. If he had remained in an obscure corner, where he was completely hidden, only an instant longer, the two detectives would have passed him, and his safety would have been assured.

The pursuit presented immense difficulties. Night was coming on, and with it that light fog which almost invariably follows the earliest days of spring. The street-lamps glimmered luridly in the mist, without throwing their light any considerable distance.

And to add to these difficulties, the streets were now thronged with workmen who were returning home after the labors of the day, with housewives purchasing provisions for supper; and around every house its numerous occupants were swarming like bees around their hive.

May took advantage of every opportunity to mislead the persons who might be following him. Groups of people, collisions between carriages, he utilized them all with such marvellous presence of mind and such rare skill, that he often glided through the crowd without leaving any sign of his passage.

At last he left the Rue des Gravilliers and entered a broader street. Reaching the Boulevard de Sebastopol, he turned to the left, and took a fresh start.

He darted on with marvelous rapidity, his elbows pressed closely to his body, husbanding his breath, and timing his steps with the precision of a dancing-master.

Stopping for nothing, without once turning his head, he hurried on.

And it was with the same regular but rapid pace that he went down the Boulevard de Sebastopol, that he crossed the Place du Chatelet, and again entered the Boulevard Saint-Michel.

Some *fiacres* were stationed near by.

May addressed one of the drivers, and after a few moments conversation entered his carriage.

The *fiacre* started off at a rapid pace.

But May was not in it. He had only passed through the carriage, and just as the driver was starting on an imaginary route which had been paid for in advance, May slipped into another vehicle, which was standing beside the *fiacre* he had hired first, and the carriage left the stand at a gallop.

Perhaps, after so many ruses, after such a formidable effort, after this last stratagem—perhaps May believed that he was free. He was mistaken.

Behind the *fiacre* which bore him onward, leaning back upon the cushion to rest—a man was running. It was Lecoq.

Poor Father Absinthe had fallen by the way. Before the Palais de Justice he paused, exhausted and breathless, and Locoq had little hope of seeing him again, since he had all he could do to keep his man in sight, without stopping to make the chalk-marks agreed upon.

May had ordered his coachman to carry him to the Place d'Italie; and had requested him to stop exactly in the middle of the square. This was about a hundred paces from the station-house in which he had been incarcerated with the Widow Chupin.

When the carriage stopped he sprang to the ground, and cast a rapid glance around him, as if looking for some dreaded shadow.

He saw nothing. Although surprised by the sudden checking of the vehicle, the detective had yet had time to fling himself flat on his stomach under the body of the carriage, though not without danger of being crushed by the wheels.

More and more reassured, apparently, May paid the coachman, and retraced his course to the Rue Mouffetard.

With a bound, Lecoq was on his feet again, and started after him, as eagerly as a ravenous dog follows a bone. He had reached the shadow cast by the large trees in the outer boulevards, when a faint whistle resounded in his ears.

"Father Absinthe!" he exclaimed, surprised and delighted.

"The same," replied that good man, "and quite rested, thanks to a good fellow who was passing in a wagon and who picked me up and brought me here——"

"Oh, enough!" interrupted Lecoq. "Let us keep our eyes open."

May stopped before first one and then another of the numerous saloons in that locality. He seemed to be looking for something.

After peering through the glass doors of three of these establishments, he entered the fourth.

The glass was not glazed; and the two detectives looked through the panes with all their eyes.

They saw the prisoner cross the room and seat himself at a table, where a man of unusual size, ruddy-faced and gray-whiskered, was already seated.

"The accomplice!" murmured Father Absinthe.

Was this really the redoubtable accomplice?

Under other circumstances Lecoq would have hesitated to place dependence on a vague similarity in personal appearance; but here probabilities were so strongly in favor of Father Absinthe's assertion that the young detective admitted its truth at once.

Was not this meeting the logical sequence, the manifest result of the chance meeting between the fugitive and the fair-haired mistress of the Hotel de Mariembourg!

"May," thought Lecoq, "began by taking all the money Mme. Milner had about her; he afterwards charged her to tell his accomplice to come and wait for him in some saloon near here. If he hesitated and looked in the different establishments; it was only because he had not been able to specify exactly which one. If they do not throw aside the mask, it will be because May is not sure that he has eluded pursuit, and because the accomplice fears that Mme. Milner has been followed."

The accomplice, if it was really the accomplice, had resorted to a disguise not unlike that adopted by May and Lecoq. He wore a dirty old blue blouse, and a hideous old slouch hat, really in tatters. He had rather exaggerated his make-up, for his sinister physiognomy was noticeable, even among the depraved and ferocious faces of the other denizens of the saloon.

For it was a regular den of cut-throats and of thieves that they had chosen for their rendezvous. There were not four workmen there who were worthy of the name. All the men who were eating and

drinking there, were more or less familiar with prison life. The least to be dreaded were the loafers of the *barrieres*, easily recognized by their glazed caps and their loosely-knotted neckerchiefs. The majority of the company present were made up of this class.

And yet May, that man who was so strongly suspected of belonging to the highest social sphere, seemed to be perfectly at home.

He called for the regular dinner and a portion of wine, and literally devoured it, gulping down his soup, and great morsels of beef, and wiping his mouth upon the back of his sleeve.

But was he conversing with his neighbor? It was impossible to discern this through the glass obscured by smoke and steam.

"I must go in," said Lecoq, resolutely. "I must get a place near them, and listen."

"Do not think of doing it," said Father Absinthe. "What if they should recognize you!"

"They will not recognize me."

"If they do, they will kill you."

Lecoq made a careless gesture.

"I really think that they would not hesitate to rid themselves of me at any cost. But, nonsense! A detective who is afraid to risk his life is no better than a low spy. Why! you saw that Gevrol, even, did not flinch."

Perhaps the old man had wished to ascertain if his companion's courage was equal to his shrewdness and sagacity. He was satisfied on this score now.

"You, my friend, will remain here to follow them if they leave hurriedly," added Lecoq.

He had already turned the knob of the door; he pushed it open, entered, and taking a seat at a table near that occupied by the fugitive, he demanded a chop and a dram in a hoarse, guttural voice.

The fugitive and the man in the slouch hat were talking, but like strangers who had met by chance, and not at all like friends who had met at a rendezous.

They were speaking the jargon of their pretended rank in life, not that puerile slang we find in romances descriptive of low life, but that vulgar and obscene language which it is impossible to render, so changeable and so diverse is the signification of its words.

"What wonderful actors!" thought Lecoq; "what perfection! what method! How I should be deceived if I were not absolutely certain!"

The man in the slouch hat held the floor; and he was giving a detailed account of the different prisons in France.

He told the character of the superintendents of the principal prisons, how the discipline was much more severe in this institution than in some other, and how the food at Poissy was worth ten times as much as that at Fontevault.

Lecoq, having finished his repast, ordered a small glass of brandy, and, with his back to the wall, and eyes closed, he pretended to sleep, and—listened.

May began talking in his turn; and he narrated his story (exactly as he had related it to the judge), from the murder up to his escape, without forgetting to mention the suspicions regarding his identity—suspicions which had afforded him great amusement, he said.

Now, he would be perfectly happy if he had money enough to take him back to Germany. But he did not possess it, nor did he know how to procure it. He had not even succeeded in selling the clothing which belonged to him, and which he had with him in a bundle.

Thereupon the man in the felt hat declared that he had too good a heart to leave a comrade in such embarassment. He knew, in the very same street, an obliging dealer in such articles, and he offered to take May there at once.

May's only response was to rise, saying "Let us start." And they did start, with Lecoq still at their heels.

They walked rapidly on until they came to the Rue Fer-a-Moulin then they turned into a narrow and dimly-lighted alley, and entered a dingy dwelling.

"Run and ask the concierge if there are not two doors by which one can leave this house," said Lecoq, addressing Father Absinthe.

The house, however, had but one entrance, and the two detectives waited.

"We are discovered!" murmured Lecoq. "I am sure of that. The fugitive must have recognized me, or the boy at the hotel de Mariembourg has described me to the accomplice."

Father Absinthe made no response, for the two men just then came out of the house. May was jingling some coins in his hand, and seemed to be in very ill-humor.

"What infernal rascals these receivers of stolen goods are!" he grumbled.

Though he had received only a small sum for his clothing, he probably felt that the kindness of his companion ought to be rewarded, for May proposed that they should take a drink together, and they entered a wine-shop near by, for that purpose.

They remained there more than an hour, drinking together, and left that only to enter a saloon a hundred paces distant.

Turned out by the proprietor, who was closing his store, the friends took refuge in the next one that remained open. The owner drove them from this, and they hurried to another, then to another.

And so by drinking of bottles of wine,

in very small glasses, they reached the Place Saint-Michel about one o'clock in the morning.

But there they found nothing to drink; all the saloons were closed.

The two men then held a consultation together, and, after a short discussion, they walked arm-in-arm in the direction of the Fabourg Saint-Germain, like a pair of friends.

The liquor which they had imbibed in such great quantities, seemed to produce its effect. They staggered considerably as they walked; and they talked very loudly and both at the same time.

In spite of the danger, Lecoq advanced near enough to seize some fragments of their conversation; and the words "a good stroke," and "money enough to satisfy one," reached his ears.

Father Absinthe's confidence wavered.

"All this will end badly," he murmured.

"Do not be alarmed," replied his friend. "I do not understand the manœuvres of these wily confederates, I frankly confess; but what does that matter after all—now that the two men are together, I feel sure of success—sure. If one runs away, the other will remain, and Gevrol shall soon see which is right, he or I."

Meanwhile the pace of the two drunken men had slackened a trifle.

By the air with which they examined the magnificent residences of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, one would have suspected them of the worst intentions.

On the Rue de Varennes, only a few steps from the Rue de la Chaise, they paused before the low wall that surrounded an immense garden.

The man in the slouch hat now did the talking. He was explaining to May—they could tell by his gestures—that the mansion to which this garden belonged fronted upon the Rue de Grenelle.

"Bah!" growled Lecoq, "how much farther will they carry this nonsense?"

They carried it to assaulting the place.

By the aid of his companion's shoulders, May raised himself to a level with the wall, and an instant after they heard the sound of his fall in the garden.

The man in the slouch hat remained in the street to watch.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE enigmatical fugitive had accomplished his strange, his inconceivable design so quickly that Lecoq had neither the time nor the desire to oppose him.

His amazement at this unexpected misfortune was so great that for ten seconds it deprived him of the power of thought and of motion.

But he quickly regained his self-possession, and he decided upon his course with that rapidity of decision which is the good genius of men of action.

With a sure eye he measured the distance that separated him from May's accomplice, and with three bounds he was upon him.

The man tried to cry out; an iron hand stifled the cry in his throat. He tried to escape, and to beat off his assailant, but a vigorous kick flung him to the ground like an infant.

Before he had time to think of further resistance he was bound, gagged, lifted, and carried, half suffocated, around the corner of the Rue de la Chaise.

Not a word, not an exclamation, not an oath, not even a sound of scuffling—nothing.

Any suspicious noise might have reached May, on the other side of the wall, and given him warning.

"How strange!" murmured Father Absinthe, too much amazed to lend a helping hand to his younger colleague. "How strange! Who would have supposed——"

"Oh, enough!" interrupted Lecoq, in that harsh, imperious voice which imminent peril always gives to energetic men. "Enough!—we will talk to-morrow. I must run away for an instant, and you will remain here. If May shows himself, capture him; do not allow him to escape."

"I understand; but what is to be done with the man who is lying there?"

"Let him be where he is. I have bound him securely, so there is nothing to fear from him. When the night-police pass, we will give him into charge——"

He paused and listened. Not far off, they heard heavy and measured footsteps approaching.

"There they are now," said Father Absinthe.

"Ah! I dared not hope it! I shall have a good chance now."

He had the opportunity he longed for; two policemen, whose attention had been attracted by the group they saw on the corner of the street, hastened towards him.

In a few words, Lecoq explained the situation. It was decided that one of the policemen should take the accomplice to the station-house, and that the other should remain with Father Absinthe to cut off May's retreat.

"And now," said Lecoq, "I will run round to the Rue de Grenelle and give the alarm. To whose house does this garden belong?"

"What!" replied one of the policemen, in surprise, "do you not know the gardens of the Duc de Sairmeuse, the famous duke who is a millionaire ten times over, and who was formally the friend——"

"I know, I know!" said Lecoq.

"The thief must have fallen into a trap if he put his nose in there. They had a reception at the mansion this evening, as they do every Monday, and everybody in the house is up. The guests have scarcely departed. There were five or six carriages still at the door as we passed."

Lecoq darted away, more troubled by what he had just heard than he had been before.

He understood now, that if May had entered this house, it was not for the purpose of committing a robbery, but in the hope of throwing his pursuers off the track, and making his escape through the Rue de Grenelle, which he might easily have done unnoticed, in the bustle and confusion attending the departure of the guests.

This last thought occurred to him on reaching the Hotel de Sairmeuse, a princely dwelling, whose immense facade was brilliantly illuminated.

The carriage of the last guest was just issuing from the court-yard, several footmen were extinguishing the lights, and the Swiss, a tall and imposing man, dazzling to behold in his gorgeous livery, was just closing the heavy, double doors of the grand entrance.

The detective advanced towards this important personage.

"Is this the Hotel de Sairmeuse?" he inquired.

The Swiss suspended his labors to survey this audacious vagabond who ventured to question him, then in a harsh voice:

"I advise you to pass on. I want none of your jesting."

Lecoq had forgotten that he was clad in the garb affected by Polyte Chupin.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "I am not what I seem to be. I am an agent of the secret-service, Monsieur Lecoq. Here is my card, if you will take my word for it; and I came to tell you that an escaped criminal has just scaled the garden wall of the Hotel de Sairmeuse."

"A crim-in-al?"

The detective thought a little exaggeration would do no harm, and perhaps ensure him more ready aid.

"Yes," he replied; "and one of the most dangerous kind—an assassin who has the blood of three victims already on his hands. We have just arrested his accomplice, who helped him over the wall."

The ruby nose of the Swiss paled perceptibly.

"I will summon the servants," he faltered.

And, suiting the action to the word, he raised his hand to the bell-rope, which was used to announce the arrival of visitors; but Lecoq stopped him.

"A word first!" said he. "Might not the fugitive have passed through the house, and escaped by this door, without being seen? In that case he would be far away by this time."

"Impossible!"

"But why?"

"Excuse me; I know what I am saying. First, the door opening into the garden is closed; it is open only during grand receptions, not for our informal Monday receptions. Secondly, monseigneur requires me to stand upon the threshold of the door when he is receiving. To-day he repeated this order, and you may be sure that I have not disobeyed him."

"Since this is the case," said Lecoq, slightly reassured, we shall perhaps succeed in finding our man. Warn the servants, but without ringing the bell. The less noise we make, the greater will be our chance of success."

In a moment the fifty valets who peopled the ante-chambers, the stables, and the kitchens of the Hotel de Sairmeuse were gathered together.

The great lanterns in the coach-houses and stables were lighted, and the entire garden was illuminated as by enchantment.

"If May is concealed here," thought Lecoq, delighted to see so many auxiliaries, "it is impossible for him to escape."

But it was in vain that the gardens were thoroughly explored again and again; no one was to be found.

The houses where the gardening tools were kept, the green-houses, the summer-houses, the two rustic pavilions at the foot of the garden, even the dog-kennels, were scrupulously visited—in vain.

The trees, with the exception of the horse-chestnut, at the foot of the garden, were almost destitute of leaves, but they were not neglected on that account. An agile boy, armed with a lantern, climbed each tree, and explored even the topmost branches.

"The assassin must have gone out where he came in," obstinately repeated the Swiss, who had armed himself with a huge pistol, and who would not let go his hold on Lecoq, fearing an accident, perhaps.

To convince him of his error, it was necessary for Lecoq to place himself in communication with Father Absinthe and the two policemen on the other side of the wall, for the man who had taken the accomplice to the station-house had performed his duty and returned.

They responded by swearing that they had not taken their eyes off the wall, and that not so much as a mouse had crossed it.

Until now, their explorations had been made in rather a hap-hazard manner, each person obeying his own inspiration;

but they now recognized the necessity of a methodically conducted search.

Lecoq took such measures that not a corner, not a recess, should escape scrutiny. He was dividing the task between his willing assistants, when a new-comer appeared upon the scene.

It was a grave, smooth-faced gentleman, in the attire of a notary.

"Monsieur Otto, monseigneur's first *valet de chambre*," the Swiss murmured in Lecoq's ear.

This important personage came on the part of M. le Duc (*he* did not say "monseigneur"), to inquire the meaning of all this uproar.

When he had received an explanation, M. Otto condescended to compliment Lecoq on his efficiency, and to recommend that the hotel should be searched from garret to cellar. These precautions alone would allay the fears of Madame la Duchesse.

He then departed; and the search began again with renewed ardor.

A mouse concealed in the gardens of the Hotel de Sairmeuse could not have escaped discovery, so minute were the investigations.

Not an object of any size was left undisturbed. The trees were examined leaf by leaf, one might almost say.

Occasionally the discouraged servants proposed to abandon the search; but Lecoq urged them on. He ran from one to the other, entreating and threatening by turns, swearing that he asked only one more effort, and that this effort would assuredly be crowned with success.

Vain promises! The fugitive could not be found.

The evidence now was conclusive. To persist in the search longer would be worse than folly. The young detective decided to recall his auxiliaries.

"That is enough," he said, in a despondent voice. "It is now certain that the murderer is no longer in the garden."

Was he cowering in some corner of the immense house, white with fear, and trembling at the noise made by his pursuers?

One might reasonably suppose this to be the case; and such was the opinion of all the servants. Above all, such was the opinion of the Swiss, who renewed with growing assurance his affirmations of a few moment's before.

"I have not moved from the threshold of my door; and I should certainly have seen any person who passed out."

"Let us go to the house, then," said Lecoq. "But first let me ask my companion, who is waiting for me in the street, to join me. It is unnecessary for him to remain there any longer."

Father Absinthe responded to the summons. All the lower doors were carefully closed and guarded, and the search through the Hotel de Sairmeuse, one of the largest and most magnificent residences in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, began.

But all the marvels of the universe could not have won a single glance or a second's attention from Lecoq. All his mind—all his thoughts—were engrossed by the prisoner.

It is certain that he traversed the superb drawing-rooms, an unrivalled picture-gallery, a magnificent dining-room, with sideboards groaning beneath their load of massive plate, without seeing a single object.

He went on, hurrying forward the servants who were guiding and lighting him. He lifted heavy articles of furniture as easily as he would have lifted a feather; he moved the chairs and sofas; he explored cupboards and wardrobes, examined hangings, curtains, and *portieres*.

No search could have been more complete. From the court-yard to the garret not a nook was left unexplored, not a corner was forgotten.

After two hours of continuous work Lecoq returned to the first floor. Only five or six servants had accompanied him on his tour of inspection. The others had dropped off one by one, wearying of this adventure, which had at first possessed the attractions of a pleasure party.

"You have seen everything, gentlemen," declared an old footman.

"Everything!" interrupted the Swiss; "everything! Certainly not. There are the apartments of monseigneur and those of Madame la Duchesse still to be explored."

"Alas!" murmured Lecoq, "what good would it do?"

But the Swiss had already gone to rap gently at one of the doors opening into the hall. His interest equalled that of the detectives. They had seen the murderer enter; he had not seen him go out; therefore the man was in the hotel, and he wished him to be found; he desired it intensely.

The door opened, and the grave and clean-shaven face of Otto, the first *valet de chambre*, showed itself.

"What the devil do you want?" he demanded in surly tones.

"To enter monseigneur's room," replied the Swiss, "in order to see if the fugitive has not taken refuge there."

"Are you crazy?" exclaimed the head *valet de chambre*. "Where could they have entered here, and how? Besides, I cannot suffer Monsieur le Duc to be disturbed. He has been at work all night, and he is just going to take a bath to rest himself before going to bed."

The Swiss seemed much vexed at this

rebuff; and Lecoq was presenting his excuses, when a voice was heard, saying:

"Let these worthy men do their duty, Otto."

"Ah! do you hear that!" exclaimed the Swiss, triumphantly.

"Very well, since Monsieur le Duc permits. That being the case, come in, I will light you through the apartments."

Lecoq entered but it was only for form's sake that he walked through the different rooms; a library, an admirable writing room, a charming smoking-room.

As he was passing through the bedroom, he had the honor of seeing M. le Duc de Sairmeuse through the half-open door of a small, white, marble bath-room.

"Ah, well!" cried the duke, affably, "is the fugitive still invisible?"

"Still invisble, monsieur," Lecoq replied respectfully.

The *valet de chambre* did not share his master's good humor.

"I think, gentlemen," said he, "that you may spare yourselves the trouble of visiting the apartments of Madame la Duchesse. It is a duty which we have taken upon ouselves—the women and I—and we have looked even in the bureau drawers."

Upon the landing the old footman, who had not ventured to enter his master's apartments, was awaiting the detectives.

He had doubtless received his orders, for he politely inquired if they desired anything, and if, after such a fatiguing night, they would not find some cold meat and a glass of wine acceptable.

Father Absinthe's eyes sparkled. He probably thought that in this *quasi* royal abode they must have delicious things to eat and drink—such viands, indeed, as he had never tasted in his life.

But Lecoq brusquely refused, and left the Hotel de Sairmeuse, reluctantly followed by his old companion.

The poor, disappointed young man was eager to be alone. For several hours he had been obliged to exert himself to the uttermost to conceal his rage and his despair.

May escaped! vanished! evaporated! The thought drove him almost mad.

What he had declared impossible had occurred.

In his confidence and pride, he had declared that he would answer for the head of the prisoner with his own life; and the prisoner had escaped him—had slipped from between his fingers!

When he was once more in the street, he paused before Father Absinthe, and, crossing his arms, demanded:

"Well! my old friend, what do you think of all this?"

That good man shook his head, and in serene unconsciousness of his want of tact, responded:

"I think that Gevrol will chuckle with delight."

At the name of this, his most cruel enemy, Lecoq bounded from the ground like a wounded bull.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Gevrol has not won the battle yet. We have lost May; it is a great misfortune; but his accomplice remains in our hands. We hold this crafty man who has until now defeated all our carefully arranged plans. He is certainly shrewd and devoted to his friend; but we will see if his devotion will withstand the prospect of hard labor in the penitentiary. And that is what awaits him, if he is silent, and if he thus accepts the responsibility of aiding and abetting the prisoner's escape. Oh! I have no fears—M. Segmuller will know how to draw the truth out of him."

He brandished his clenched fist with a threatening air; then, in calmer tones, he added:

"But let us go to the station-house where he was carried. I wish to question him a little."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

It was not daylight, and nearly six o'clock; and when Father Absinthe and his companion reached the station house, they found the superintendent seated at a small table, making out his report.

He did not move when they entered, failing to recognize them under their disguise,

But when they mentioned their names, the chief rose with evident *empressement*, and extended his hand.

"Upon my word!" said he, "I congratulate you on your capture last night."

Father Absinthe and Lecoq exchanged an anxious look.

"What capture?" they both asked in a breath.

"The individual whom you sent me last night so carefully bound.

"Well?"

The superintendent burst into a hearty laugh.

"So you are ignorant of your good fortune. Ah! luck has favored you, and you will receive a very handsome reward."

"Pray tell us what we have captured?" demanded Father Absinthe, impatiently.

"A scoundrel of the deepest dye, an escaped convict, who has been missing for three months. You must have a description of him in your pocket—Joseph Couturier, in short."

On hearing these words, Lecoq became so frightfully pale that Father Absinthe,

believing him to be about to fall, extended his arms.

Some one hastened to bring a chair, and he seated himself.

"Joseph Couturier," he faltered, evidently unconscious of what he was saying. "Joseph Couturier! an escaped convict!"

The superintendent certainly did not understand Lecoq's agitation, any better than he understood Father Absinthe's discomfited air.

"You have reason to be proud of your work; your success will make a sensation this morning. You have captured a famous prize. I can see Gevrol's nose now, when he hears the news. Only yesterday he was boasting that he alone was capable of securing this dangerous rascal."

What irony could be more bitter than these compliments, after such an irreparable failure. They fell crushingly upon Lecoq, like so many blows of a hammer, wounding him so cruelly that he rose, and summoning all his energy, he said:

"You must be mistaken. This man is not Couturier."

"I am not mistaken; you may be assured of that. In every respect he answers the description appended to the circular ordering his capture. Even the little finger of his left hand is lacking, as mentioned in the order."

"Ah! that is a proof indeed!" groaned Father Absinthe.

"It is indeed. And I know another even more conclusive. Couturier is an old acquaintance of mine. I have had him in custody before; and he recognized *me* last night as I recognized him."

After this, further argument was impossible; so it was in an entirely different tone that Lecoq remarked:

"At least, my friend, you will allow me to address a few questions to your prisoner."

"Oh! as many as you like. But first, let us bar the door and place two of my men before it. This Couturier has a fondness for the open air, and he would not hesitate to dash out our brains if he saw a chance of escape."

After taking these precautions, the man was removed from the cage in which he had been confined.

He advanced smilingly, having already recovered that nonchalant manner common to old offenders who, when they are once in custody, seem to lose all feeling of anger against the police; like gamblers who, having lost all, shake hands with their adversary.

He at once recognized Lecoq.

"Ah! it is you who did the business for me last night. You can boast of having a solid fist! You fell upon me very unexpectedly; and the back of my neck is still the worse for your caresses."

"Then, if I were to ask a favor of you, you would not be disposed to grant it?"

"Oh, yes! all the same. I have no more malice in my composition than a chicken; and I rather like your face. What do you wish?

"I should like some information concerning your companion of last evening."

The man's face darkened.

"I really am unable to give it to you," he replied.

"Why?"

"Because I do not know him. I never saw him until last evening."

"It is hard to believe that. One does not take the first-comer for an expedition like yours last evening. Before undertaking such a job with a man, one finds out something about him.

"I do not say that I have not been guilty of a stupid blunder. I could murder myself for it. There was nothing about the man to make me suspect that he was one of the secret-service. He spread a net for me, and I jumped into it. It was made for me, of course; but it was not necessary for me to put my foot into it."

"You are mistaken, my man," said Lecoq. "The individual did not belong to the police force. I pledge you my word of honor, he did not.

For a moment Couturier surveyed Lecoq with a knowing air, as if he hoped to discover whether he were speaking the truth or attempting to deceive him.

"I believe you," he said, at last. "To prove it I will tell you how it all happened. I was dining alone last evening in a restaurant on the Rue Mouffetard, when that man came in and took a seat beside me. Naturally we began to talk; and I thought him a very good sort of a fellow. Apropos of, I know not what, he mentioned the fact that he had some clothing which he desired to sell; and I, glad to oblige him, took him to the house of a friend, who purchased them from him."

"It was doing him a service, was it not? Well, he offered me something to drink, and I returned the compliment, so that by midnight I began to see double.

"He chose his time to propose a plan, which would, he swore enrich, us both. It was to steal all the silver from a superb mansion.

"There would be no risk for me; he would take charge of the whole affair. I had only to help him over the wall, and keep watch.

"It was tempting—was it not? You would have thought so, had you been in my place. Still I hesitated.

"But the man insisted. He swore that he was acquainted with the habits of the

house. That Monday evening was a grand gala night there, and that on these evenings the servants did not lock up the plate. After a little I consented."

A fleeting color tinged Lecoq's pale cheeks.

Are you sure that the man told you that the Duc de Sairmeuse received every Monday evening?" he asked, eagerly.

"Certainly; how else could I have known it! He even mentioned the name you uttered just now, a name ending in —euse."

A strange, absolutely admissible thought had just flitted through Lecoq's mind.

"What if it were he?" he said to himself. "What if May and the Duc de Sairmeuse should be one and the same person?"

But he dismissed this idea, and despised himself for entertaining it, even for a moment.

He cursed his inclination to look upon the romantic and impossible side of events. Why was it surprising that a man of the world, such as he supposed May to be, should know the day chosen by the Duc de Sairmeuse to receive his friends?

He had nothing more to expect from Couturier. He thanked him, and after shaking hands with the superintendent, he departed, leaning on Father Absinthe's arm.

For he really had need of a support. His limbs trembled beneath the weight of his body; his head whirled, and he felt sick both in body and in mind.

He had failed miserably, disgracefully. He had flattered himself that he possessed a genius for his calling, and how easy it had been to outwit him.

May, to rid himself of him, Lecoq, had only been obliged to throw him a pretended accomplice, picked up by chance in a bar-room as a hunter, who finds himself too hard pressed by a bear, throws him his glove.

And, like a stupid beast, he had been deceived by this commonplace stratagem.

Father Absinthe was rendered uneasy by his colleague's evident dejection.

"Where are we going?" he inquired; "to the Palais de Justice, or to the prefecture?"

Lecoq shuddered on hearing this question, which brought him face to face with the horrible reality of his situation.

"To the prefecture!" he responded. "Why should I go there? To expose myself to Gevrol's insults, perhaps! I have not courage enough for that. Nor do I feel that I have strength to go to M. Segmuller and say: 'Forgive me; you have judged me too favorably. I am a fool!"

"What are we to do?"

"Ah! I do not know. Perhaps I shall embark for America—perhaps I will throw myself into the river."

He had proceeded about one hundred feet, when he stopped short.

"No!" he exclaimed, with a furious stamp of the foot. "No, this affair shall not end where it is. I have sworn that I will have the solution of this enigma—and I will have it!"

For a moment he reflected; then, in a calmer voice, he added:

"There is one man who can save us, a man who will see what I have not been able to see, who will understand what I could not understand. Let us go and ask counsel of him; my course will depend upon his response—come!"

CHAPTER XL.

After a day and a night like those through which they had just passed, one would have supposed that these two men must have felt an irresistible desire to sleep.

But Lecoq was upheld by wounded vanity, intense disappointment, and a hope of revenge which was not yet extinguished.

As for Father Absinthe, he was not unlike those poor horses attached to a hackney coach, and which, having forgotten that there is such a thing as repose, are no longer conscious of fatigue, and travel on until they fall dead.

He felt that his limbs were failing him; but Lecoq said: "It is necessary," and so he walked on.

They went to Lecoq's humble lodgings where they laid aside their disguise, and, after breakfast, started again.

It was to the Rue Saint-Lazare, a few steps from the prison, that the two men repaired. They entered one of the handsomest houses on the street, and inquired of the concierge:

"Where is M. Tabaret?"

"Ah! he is sick."

"Very sick?" inquired Lecoq, anxiously.

"It is hard to tell," replied the man; "it is his old trouble—gout."

And with an air of hypocritical commiseration, he added:

"Monsieur is not wise to lead the life he does. Women are all very well, but at his age———"

The two detectives exchanged a meaning glance, and as soon as their backs were turned they began to laugh.

They were still laughing when they rang the bell on the next floor.

The buxom-looking woman who came to open the door, informed them that her master would receive them, although he was confined to his bed.

"But the doctor is with him now," she

added. "Will the gentlemen wait until he has gone?"

The gentlemen replying in the affirmative, she conducted them into a handsome library, and invited them to take a seat.

This man whom Lecoq had come to consult was celebrated for his wonderful shrewdness, and his penetration exceeded the bounds of possibility.

He was an old employe of the Mont-de-Piete, where he held a position for forty-five years, just managing to exist upon the meagre stipend he received.

Enriched suddenly by an unexpected bequest, he at once asked for a dismissal, and the next day he began to long for this very employment that he had so often anathematized.

He endeavored to divert his mind; he began to make a collection of old books; he piled up huge mountains of tattered and worm-eaten volumes in immense oaken chests. Vain attempts! He could not shake off his *ennui*.

He grew thin and yellow; his income of forty thousand francs was killing him, when a sudden inspiration came to his relief.

It came to him one evening after reading the memoirs of a celebrated detective, one of those men of subtle perception, soft as silk, supple as steel, whom justice sometimes sets upon the track of crime.

"And I also am a detective!" he exclaimed.

It was necessary for him to prove it.

With a feverish interest, which dated from that day, he persued every book he could find that had any connection with such subjects. Letters, memoirs, reports, pamphlets—everything.

He was pursuing his education. If a crime was committed he started out in quest of all the details, and worked up the case by himself.

But these platonic investigations did not suffice long.

One evening, at dusk, he summoned all his resolution, and going on foot to the prefecture, humbly begged employment from the officials there.

He was not very favorably received; applicants are numerous. But he pleaded his cause so adroitly that he was charged with some trifling commissions. He performed them admirably. The difficult step had been taken.

He was entrusted with others; and he displayed a wonderful aptitude for his chosen work.

The affairs of Madame B——, the rich banker's wife, made him famous.

Consulted at a moment when the police had abandoned all hope of solving the mystery, he proved by A. plus B., by a mathematical deduction, so to speak, that the dear lady must have stolen from herself.

He had told the truth.

After that he was always called upon for counsel in obscure and difficult cases.

It would be difficult to tell the *status* he held at the prefecture. When a person is employed, salary, compensation of some kind is understood; but this strange man had never consented to receive a penny.

What he did he did for his own pleasure—for the gratification of a passion which had become his very life—for glory, for fame.

When the funds allowed him seemed to him insufficient, he plunged his hands into his own pockets; and the men who were working with him never left him without carrying with them substantial tokens of his munificence.

Of course, such a man had many enemies.

For no compensation, he worked as much and far better than two inspectors of police. In calling him "spoil-trade," they were not far from right.

The sound of his name alone almost threw Gevrol into convulsions. And still the jealous inspector was always alluding to an error of which this remarkable man had been guilty.

Inclined to obstinacy, like all enthusiastic men, Father Tabaret had once effected the conviction of an innocent man—a poor little tailor, who was accused of killing his wife.

This had the effect of cooling his ardor very perceptibly; and afterwards he seldom visited the prefecture.

But in spite of that, he remained the oracle, like those great lawyers who, having become disgusted with practice at the bar, still win great and glorious triumphs in their quiet studies, and lend to others the weapons which they no longer desire to wield themselves.

When the authorities were undecided what course to pursue, they said: "Let us go and consult Tirauclair."

For this was the name by which he was known: a sobriquet derived from a phrase:

"Il faut que cela se tire au clair," which was ever upon his lips.

Perhaps this sobriquet aided him in the concealment of his occupation, which none of his personal friends had ever suspected.

His disturbed life when he was working up a case, the strange visitors he received, his frequent and prolonged absence from home, were imputed to a very unseasonable inclination to gallantry on his part.

His concierge was deceived as well as his friends.

They laughed at his supposed infatuation; they called him an old libertine.

But people never once suspected that Tirauclair and Tabaret were one and the same person.

Lecoq was trying to gain hope and courage by reflecting upon the history of this eccentric man, when the housekeeper reappeared, announcing the departure of the physician.

At the same time she opened a door and said:

"This is monsieur's room; these gentlemen can enter now."

CHAPTER XLI.

On a large canopied bed, sweating and panting beneath his covers, lay the two-faced oracle, Tirauclair, of the prefecture—Tabaret, of the Rue Saint Lazare.

It was impossible to believe that the owner of this face, in which stupidity seemed always disputing with perpetual astonishment, could possess superior talent, or even an average amount of intelligence.

With his retreating forehead, and his immense ears, his odiously *retrousse* nose, his tiny eyes and coarse, thick lips, M. Tabaret presented an excellent picture of an ignorant and stupid petty-proprietor.

When he went into the streets the impudent *gamins* shouted after him; but his ugliness did not trouble him in the least, and he seemed to take pleasure in increasing his appearance of stupidity, delighting himself with the reflection that "he is not really a genius who seems to be one."

At the sight of the two detectives, whom he knew very well, the eyes of the sick man sparkled.

"Good-morning, Lecoq, my boy," said he. "Good-morning, my old Absinthe. So you think enough of poor Papa Tirauclair down there to come and see him?"

"We need your counsel, Monsieur Tabaret."

"Ah ha!"

"We have just been as completely outwitted as if we were two children."

"What! was your man so very cunning?"

Lecoq heaved a mighty sigh.

"So cunning," he replied, "that, if I were superstitious, I should say he was the very devil himself."

The face of the sick man wore a comical expression of envy.

"What! you have found a treasure like that, and you complain!" Why, it is a magnificent opportunity—a chance to be proud of! You see, my boys, everything has degenerated in these days. The race of great criminals is dying out—only their counterfeit remains—a crowd of low offenders who are not worth the shoe leather expended in pursuing them. It is enough to disgust a detective, upon my word. No more trouble, emotion, anxiety, and excitement. Now, when a crime is committed, the criminal is in jail the next day. One might take the omnibus and go to the culprit's house and arrest him. One always finds him—the more is the pity. But what has your man been doing?"

"He has killed three men."

"Oh! oh! oh!" said Father Tabaret, in three different tones.

This criminal was evidently superior to others of his species.

"And where did it happen?"

"In a saloon, near the *barriere*."

"Oh! yes, I recollect; a man named May. The murders were committed in the Widow Chupin's cabin. I saw it mentioned in the *Gazette des Tribunaux*, and Fanferlot l'Ecureuil, who comes to see me, told me that you were strangely puzzled about the prisoner's identity. So you are charged with investigating the affair? So much the better. Tell me all about it, and I will aid you with all my little power."

He suddenly checked himself, and lowering his voice, said:

"But first do me the favor to rise; wait—when I shall make a sign to you, open that door there, on the left, very suddenly. Mariette, my housekeeper, who is curiosity itself, is there listening. I hear her hair rubbing against the lock—go!"

The young detective obeyed, and Mariette, caught in the act, hastened away, pursued by her master's sarcasms.

"You might have known that you could not succeed at that!" he shouted after her.

Though they were much nearer the door than Papa Tirauclair, neither Lecoq nor Father Absinthe had heard the slightest sound; and they looked at each other, wondering whether their host had been playing a little farce for their benefit, or whether his sense of hearing really possessed the marvelous acuteness which this incident would indicate.

"Now," said Tabaret, settling himself more comfortably upon his pillows—"now I will listen to you, my boy. Mariette will not come back again."

On his way to Father Tabaret's, Lecoq had busied himself in preparing his story; and it was in the clearest possible manner that he related all the details, all the incidents connected with this strange affair, from the moment in which Gevrol had forced open the door of the Poivriere, to the instant when May had leaped over the garden wall at the Hotel de Sairmeuse.

While Lecoq was telling his story, Father Tabaret was transformed.

His gout was entirely forgotten.

According to the different phases of the recital, he turned and twisted upon his bed, uttered little cries of delight or disappointment, or lay motionless, plunged in a sort of ecstatic beatitude, like an enthusiast in classical music, listening to some divine melody of the great Beethoven.

"If I had been there! If only I had been there!" he murmured now and then through his set teeth.

When Lecoq's story was ended, his host gave vent to his enthusiasm.

"It is beautiful! it is grand!" he exclaimed. "And with just that one sentence: 'It is the Prussians who are coming,' for a starting point! Lecoq, my boy, I must say that you have conducted this affair like an angel!"

"Do you not mean to say like a fool?" demanded the discouraged detective.

"No, my friend, certainly not. You have rejoiced my old heart. I can die; I shall have a successor. I would like to embrace you in the name of logic. Ah! that Gevrol who betrayed you—for he did betray you, there is no doubt about it—that obtuse and obstinate general is not worthy to unloose the latchets of your shoes!"

"You overpower me, Monsieur Tabaret!" interrupted Lecoq, who was not yet wholly convinced that his host was not mocking him; "but nevertheless, May has disappeared; and I have lost my reputation, before I had begun to make it."

"Do not be in such a hurry to reject my compliments," responded Father Tabaret, with a horrible grimace. "I say that you have conducted this investigation very well; but it could have been done much better, very much better. You have a talent for this work, that is evident; but you lack experience; you become elated by a trifling advantage, or you are discouraged by a mere nothing; you fail, and yet you persist in holding fast to a fixed idea, as a moth flutters about a candle. Then, you are young. But never mind that, it is a fault you will outgrow only too soon. And now, to speak frankly, I must tell you that you have made a great many blunders."

Lecoq hung his head like a schoolboy receiving a reprimand from his teacher. Was he not a scholar, and was not this old man his master?

"I will now enumerate your mistakes," continued Papa Tabaret, "and I will show you where you, on at least three occasions, have allowed an opportunity for solving this mystery to escape you."

"But, monsieur——"

"Chut! chut! my boy, let me talk a while now. With what axiom did you start? With this: 'Always distrust appearances; believe precisely the contrary of what appears true, or even probable.' "

"Yes, that is exactly what I said to myself."

"And it was a very wise conclusion. With that idea in your lantern to illumine your path, you ought to have gone straight to the truth. But you are young, as I said before; and the very first circumstance you find that seems at all probable, you forget entirely the rule that should govern your conduct. As soon as you meet a fact that seems *more* than probable, you swallow it as eagerly as a gudgeon swallows the bait."

This comparison could but pique the young detective.

"I have not been, it seems to me, as simple as that," he protested.

"Bah! What did you think, then, when you were told that M. d'Escorval had broken his leg, in alighting from his carriage?"

"Believe! I believed what they told me, because——"

He paused, and Papa Tirauclair burst into a hearty fit of laughing.

"You believed it," he said, "because it was a very plausible story."

"What would you have believed had you been in my place?"

"Exactly the opposite of what they told me. I might have been mistaken; but it would be the logical conclusion of the course of reasoning I adopted at first."

This conclusion was so bold that Lecoq was disconcerted.

"What!" he exclaimed; "do you suppose that M. d'Escorval's fall is only a fiction? that he has not broken his leg?"

Papa Tabaret's face suddenly assumed a serious expression.

"I do not *suppose* it," he replied; "I am sure of it."

CHAPTER XLII.

LECOQ'S confidence in the oracle he was consulting was very great; but even Papa Tirauclair might be mistaken, and what he had just said seemed to be such an enormity, so completely beyond the bounds of possibility, that the young man could not hide a gesture of incredulity.

"So, Monsieur Tabaret, you are ready to affirm that M. d'Escorval is in as good health as Father Absinthe or myself; and that he has confined himself to his room for two months to give a semblance of truth to a falsehood?"

"I would be willing to swear it."

"But what could possibly have been his object?"

Tabaret lifted his hands to heaven, as

if imploring forgiveness for the young man's stupidity.

"And it was in you—in you that *I* saw a successor, and a continuator of my method of induction; and now, you ask me such a question as that! Reflect a moment. Must I give you an example to aid you? Very well. Suppose yourself a judge. A crime is committed; you are charged with the duty of investigating it, and you visit the prisoner to question him. Very well. This prisoner has, up to that time, succeeded in concealing his identity—this was the truth in the present case, was it not? Very well. What would you do, if, at the very first glance, you recognize, under the disguise of the prisoner, your best friend, or your bitterest enemy? What would you do, I say?"

"I should say to myself that a magistrate who is obliged to hesitate between his duty and his inclinations, is placed in a very trying position, and I should endeavor to avoid it."

"I understand that; but would you reveal the true personality of this prisoner (your friend, or your enemy, as the case may be), if you alone knew it?"

It was such a delicate question; the answer was so difficult that Lecoq was silent, reflecting.

"I would reveal nothing whatever!" claimed Father Absinthe. "I would remain absolutely neutral. I should tell myself that others were trying to discover his identity; and they might do it if they could—but my conscience should be clear."

It was the cry of honesty; not the counsel of a casuist.

"I should also be silent," replied Lecoq, at last; "and it seems to me that, in keeping silence, I should not fail in the obligation of a magistrate."

Papa Tabaret rubbed his hands vigorously, as he always did when he was about to present some overwhelming argument.

"Such being the case," said he, "do me the favor to tell me what pretext you would invent in order to withdraw from the case without arousing suspicion?"

"I do not know; I cannot say now. But if I were placed in such a position I should find some excuse—invent something——"

"And if you could find nothing better," interrupted Tabaret, "you would adopt M. d'Escorval's expedient; you would pretend that you had broken some limb. Only, as you are a clever fellow, it would be your *arm* that you would sacrifice. It would be less inconvenient; and you would not be condemned to seclusion for several months."

"So, Monsieur Tabaret, you are convinced that M. d'Escorval knows who May really is."

Father Tirauclair turned so suddenly in his bed that his forgotten gout drew from him a terrible groan.

"Can you doubt it?" he exclaimed. "Can you possibly doubt it? What proofs do you ask, then? What connection do you see between the fall of the judge and the prisoner's attempt at suicide?

"I was not there, as you were; I know the story only as you have told it to me. I could not see it with my own eyes; but this is as I understand it—listen:

"M. d'Escorval, his task at the Widow Chupin's house completed, comes to the prison to examine the assassin. The two men recognize each other. Had they been alone, mutual explanations might have ensued, and affairs taken quite a different turn.

"But they were not alone; a third party was present—M. d'Escorval's clerk. So they could say nothing. The judge, in a troubled voice, asked a few commonplace questions; the prisoner, terribly agitated, replied as best he could.

"After leaving the cell, M. d'Escorval said to himself: 'No, I cannot decide in the case of a man whom I hate!' "

"He was terribly perplexed. When you tried to speak to him, as he was leaving the prison, he harshly told you to wait until to-morrow; and a quarter of an hour later he pretended to fall."

"Then you think that M. d'Escorval and this so-called May are enemies?" inquired Lecoq.

"Do not the facts demonstrate that beyond a doubt?" asked Tabaret. "If they were friends, the judge might have done the same exactly; but the prisoner would not have attempted to strangle himself."

"But thanks to you; his life was saved; for he owes his life to you. During the night, confined in a straight-jacket, he was powerless to injure himself. Ah! how he must have suffered that night! What agony!

"So, in the morning, when he was conducted to the cabinet of the judge for examination, it was with a sort of frenzy that he dashed into the dreaded presence of his enemy.

"He expected to find M. d'Escorval there, ready to triumph over his misfortunes; and he intended to say:

" 'Yes, it is I. There is a fatality in it. I have killed three men, and I am in your power. But, for the very reason that there is a mortal hatred between us, you owe it to yourself not to prolong my tortures! It would be infamous cowardice in you to do so!'

"But, instead of M. d'Escorval, he sees M. Segmuller. Then what happens?

"He is surprised, and his eye betrays the astonishment he feels when he realizes the generosity of his enemy, whom he had believed implacable.

"Then a smile mounts to his lips—a

smile of hope; for he thinks, since M. d'Escorval has not betrayed his secret, that he may be able to preserve it, and that he may, perhaps, emerge from this shadow of shame and of crime with his name and his honor still untarnished."

And with a sudden change of tone, and an ironical gesture, Papa Tabaret added:

"And that—is my explanation."

Old Father Absinthe had risen, frantic with delight.

"*Cristi!*" he exclaimed; "that is it! that is it!"

Lecoq's approbation was none the less evident, because it was mute.

He could appreciate this rapid and wonderful work of induction far better than his companion.

For a moment or two Papa Tabaret reclined upon his pillows enjoying the sweets of admiration, then he continued:

"Do you desire further proofs, my boy? Recollect the perseverance M. d'Escorval displayed in sending M. Segmuller for information. I admit that a man may have a passion for his profession; but not to such an extent as this. At that time you believed that his leg was broken. How is it that you felt no surprise that a judge, lying upon the rack, with his bones in fragments, should take so much interest in a miserable murderer? I have no broken bones, I have only the gout; but I know very well that when I am suffering half the world might be judging the other half, and the idea of sending Mariette for information would never occur to me. Ah! a moment's reflection would have enabled you to understand the reason of his solicitude, and would probably have given you the key to the whole mystery."

Lecoq, who was such a brilliant casuist in the Widow Chupin's hovel, who was so full of confidence in himself, and so earnest in expounding his theories to simple Father Absinthe—Lecoq hung his head abashed and did not utter a word.

But he felt neither anger nor impatience.

He had come to ask advice, and strange to say, he thought it quite right that it should be given him.

He had made mistakes, and when they were pointed out to him, he did not become angry—another marvel!—and he did not try to prove that he had been right when he had been wrong.

Meanwhile M. Tabaret had poured out a great glass of *tisane*, and drained it. He now resumed:

"I need not remind you of the mistake you made in not obliging Toinon Chupin to tell you all she knew about this affair while she was in your power. 'A bird in the hand'—you know the proverb."

"Be assured, Monsieur Tabaret, that this mistake has cost me enough to make me realize the danger of ever allowing the zeal of a well-disposed witness to cool."

"We will say no more about that, then. But I must tell you that three or four times, at least, it has been in your power to clear up this mystery."

He paused, awaiting some protestation from his disciple. None came.

"If he says this," thought the young detective, "it must indeed be so."

This discretion made a great impression on Papa Tabaret, and increased the esteem he had conceived for Lecoq.

"The first time that you were lacking in discretion was when you were trying to discover the owner of the diamond ear-ring found in the Poivriere."

"I made every effort to discover the last owner."

"You tried very hard, I do not deny that; but as for making every effort—that is saying too much. For example, when you heard that the Baroness de Watchau was dead, and that all her property had been sold, what did you do?"

"You know; I went immediately to the person who had charge of the sale."

"Very well! and afterwards?"

"I examined the catalogue; and as, among the jewels mentioned there, I could find none that answered the description of these magnificent diamonds, I knew that the clue was lost entirely."

"There is precisely where you are mistaken!" exclaimed Papa Tirauclair, exultantly. "If a jewel of such great value is not mentioned in the catalogue of the sale the Baroness de Watchau could not have possessed it at the time of her death. And if she no longer possessed it she must have given it away, or sold it. And to whom? To one of her friends, very probably.

"For this reason, had I been in your place, I should have inquired the names of her intimate friends, which would have been a very easy task; and then, I should have tried to win the favor of all the *femmes-de-chambre* of these lady friends. This would have been only a pastime for a good-looking young fellow like you.

"Then," he continued, "I would have shown this ear-ring to each maid in succession until I found one who said: 'This diamond belongs to my mistress,' or one who was seized with a nervous trembling."

"And to think that this idea did not once occur to me!"

"Wait, wait. I am coming to the second mistake you made. What did you do when you obtained possession of the trunk which May pretended was his? You played directly into this cunning adversary's hand. How could you fail to see that this trunk was only an accessory

to the comedy, that it could only have been deposited with Mme. Milner by the accomplice, and that all its contents must have been purchased for the occasion."

"I knew this, of course; but even under these circumstances, what could I do?"

"What could you do my boy? Well, I am only a poor old man, but *I* would have interviewed every clothier in Paris; and at last some one of them would have exclaimed: 'Those articles! Why, I sold them to an individual like this or that—who purchased them for one of his friends whose measure he brought with him.'"

Angry with himself, Lecoq struck his clenched hand violently upon the table by his side.

"*Sacrebleu!*" he exclaimed, "that method was infallible and as simple as the day. Ah! never while I live shall I forgive myself for my stupidity!"

"Gently, gently!" interrupted the sick man; "you are going too far, my dear boy. Stupidity is not the proper word at all; you should say carelessness, thoughtlessness. You are young—what else could one expect? What is far less inexcusable is the manner in which you conducted the chase, after the prisoner was allowed to escape."

"Alas!" murmured the young man, now completely discouraged; "did I blunder in that?"

"Terribly, my son; and here is where I really blame you. What diabolical influence induced you to follow this May, step by step, like a common policeman?"

This time Lecoq was stupefied.

"Ought I to have allowed him to escape me?" he inquired.

"No; but if I had been by your side when, beneath the gallery of the Odeon, you so clearly divined the prisoner's intentions, I should have said to you: 'This fellow, friend Lecoq, will hasten to the house of Mme. Milner to inform her of his escape. Let us run after him.' And when he had left the Hotel de Mariembourg, I should have added: 'Now, let him go where he chooses; but attach yourself to Mme. Milner; do not lose sight of her; cling to her as closely as her own shadow, for she will conduct you to the accomplice—that is to say—to the solution of the mystery.'"

"That is the truth; I see it now."

"But instead of that, what did you do? You ran to the hotel, you terrified the boy! When a fisherman has hold of the seine, and is ready to draw in the fish, he does not beat the drum to frighten them away!"

Papa Tabaret thus reviewed the entire course of instruction, remodeling it in accordance with his method of induction.

Lecoq had, at first, had a magnificent inspiration. In his first investigations he had displayed remarkable talent; and yet he had not succeeded. Why? Simply because he had neglected the axiom with which he started: "Always distrust what seems probable!"

But the young man listened with divided attention. A thousand projects were darting through his brain. Soon he could restrain himself no longer.

"You have saved me from despair, monsieur," he interrupted. "I thought all was lost; but I see that my blunders can be repaired What I neglected to do, I can do now; there is still time. Have I not the diamond ear-ring as well as divers effects of the prisoner still in my possession. Mme. Milner still owns the Hotel de Mariembourg, and I am going to watch it."

"And with what object, my boy?"

"For what object? Why, to find my prisoner, to be sure!"

Had he been less engrossed in his idea. Lecoq would have detected a slight smile in Tirauclair's thick lips.

"Ah, my son! is it possible that you do not suspect the real name of this pretended buffoon?"

Lecoq trembled and turned away his face. He did not wish Tabaret to see his eyes.

"No," he replied, "I do not suspect——"

"You are uttering a falsehood!" interrupted the sick man. You know as as well as I do, that May resides on the Rue de Grenelle-Saint-Germain, and that he is known as M. le Duc de Sairmeuse."

On hearing these words, Father Absinthe laughed heartily.

"Ah! that is a good joke!" he exclaimed. "Ah, ha!"

Such was not Lecoq's opinion, however.

"Well, yes, Monsieur Tabaret," said he, "this idea did occur to me; but I drove it away."

"And why, if you please?"

"Because—because——"

"Because you would not believe the logical sequence of your premises; but I am consistent, and I say: 'It seems impossible that the assassin in the cabin of the Widow Chupin should be the Duke de Sairmeuse." Hence, the murderer in the Chupin cabin, May, the pretended buffoon, is the Duke de Sairmeuse!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

How this idea had entered Papa Tabaret's head, Lecoq could not comprehend.

A vague suspicion had, it is true, flitted through his own mind; but it was at a moment when his despair at seeing his

prisoner elude his grasp, as well as certain words uttered by Couturier, would furnish an excuse for almost any supposition.

But father Tirauclair calmly—in cold blood, so to speak—announced as an undeniable fact a suspicion which he, Lecoq, had not dared to entertain, even for an instant, in his wildest excitement.

The sick man could not fail to notice the amazement of his visitor.

"You look as if you had suddenly fallen from the clouds," said he. "Do you suppose that I spoke at random like a parrot?"

"No, certainly not, monsieur; but——"

"Hush! You are surprised because you know nothing of contemporaneous history. If you do not wish to remain all your life as a common detective, like your friend Gevrol, you must inform yourself on this subject."

"I must confess that I do not see the connection."

M. Tabaret deigned no response. Turning to Father Absinthe, and addressing him in the most affable tones, he said:

"Do me the favor, my old friend, to go to my library and bring me two large volumes entitled: 'General Biography of the Men of the Present Age.' They are in the book-case on the right."

Father Absinthe hastened to obey; and as soon as he was in possession of the books, M. Tabaret began turning the pages with an eager hand, like a person seeking some word in a dictionary.

"Esbayron," he muttered, "Escars, Escayrac, Escher, Escodica—at last we have it—Escorval! Listen attentively, my boy, and you will be enlightened."

This injunction was entirely unnecessary. Never had the young detective's faculties been more keenly on the alert.

"It was in an emphatic voice that the sick man read:

"'Escorval (Louis-Guillaume, baron d').—Diplomatist and politician, born in Montaignac, December 3rd, 1769, of an old family of lawyers. He was completing his studies in Paris on the breaking out of the Revolution. He embraced the cause with all the ardor of youth. But, soon disapproving the excesses committed in the name of Liberty, he sided with the Reactionists, counselled, perhaps, by Roederer, who was one of his relatives.

"'Commended to the favor of the first consul by M. de Talleyrand, he entered upon his diplomatic career with a mission to Switzerland; and during the existence of the empire he was intrusted with many very important negotiations.

"'Devoted body and soul to the emperor, he found himself gravely compromised by the Second Restoration.

"At the time of the disturbances in Montaignac, he was arrested on the double charge of high treason and conspiracy. He was tried by a military commission, and condemned to death.

"'The sentence was not executed, however. He owed his life to the noble devotion and heroic energy of a priest, one of his friends, the Abbe Midon, *cure* of the little village of Sairmeuse.

"'The Baron d'Escorval had only one son who entered upon the duties of magistrate at a very early age.'"

Lecoq was intensely disappointed.

"I understand," he remarked. "It is the biography of the father of our judge. Only I do not see that it teaches us anything."

An ironical smile curved Father Tirauclair's lips.

"It teaches us that M. d'Escorval's father was condemned to death," he replied. "That is something, I assure you. A little patience, you will soon know all."

He had found a new leaf, and he continued his readlng:

"'Sairmeuse (Anne-Marie-Victor de Tingry, Duc de).—A French general and politician, born at the chateau de Sairmeuse, near Montaignac, January 17, 1758. The Sairmeuse family is one of the oldest and most illustrious in France. It must not he confounded with the ducal family De Sermeuse, whose name is written with an e.

"'Leaving France at the beginning of the Revolution, Anne de Sairmeuse distinguished himself by his brilliant exploits in the army of Conde. Some years later he offered his sword to Russia; and it is asserted by some of his biographers that he was fighting in the Russian ranks at the time of the disastrous retreat from Moscow.

"'Returning to France with the Bourbons, he became quite famous by reason of the intensity of his ultra-royalist opinions. It is certain that he had the good fortune to regain the possession of his immense family estates; and the rank and dignities which he had gained in foreign lands were confirmed.

"'Appointed by the king to serve upon the military commission charged with bringing to justice and trying the conspirators of Montaignac, he displayed a severity and a zeal that resulted in the capture and conviction of all the parties implicated.'"

Lecoq sprang up with sparkling eyes.

"I see it clearly now," he exclaimed. "The father of the present duke de Sairmeuse tried to have the father of the present M. d'Escorval beheaded."

M. Tabaret was the picture of complacency.

"You see the assistance history gives," said he. "But I have not finished, my boy; the present Duke de Sairmeuse

also has his article, that will be of interest to us. So listen:

"'Sairmeuse (Anne-Marie-Martial).—Son of the preceding, was born in London in 1791, received his early education in England, and completed it at the Court of Austria, which he has since visited on several confidential missions.

"'Heir of the opinions, the prejudices, and the animosities of his father, he placed at the service of his party a highly cultivated intellect, unusual penetration, and extraordinary abilities. A leader at the time when political passion was raging highest, he had the courage to assume the sole responsibility of the most extreme measures. Obliged to retire from office on account of general animadversion, he left behind him ill-will and hatred, which will be extinguished only with his life.'"

The sick man closed the book, and with assumed modesty, he asked:

"Ah, well! What do you think of my little method of induction?"

But Lecoq was too much engrossed with his own thoughts to respond.

"I think," he remarked, "if the Duke de Sairmeuse had disappeared for two months, the period of May's imprisonment, all Paris would have known it, and so———"

"You are dreaming!" interrupted Father Tabaret. "With his wife and his *valet de chambre* for accomplices, the duke could absent himself for a year if he wished, and all his servants would believe him in the hotel."

"I admit that," said Lecoq, at last; "but unfortunately, there is one circumstance which overturns this theory we have built up so laboriously."

"And what is that, if you please?"

"If the man who took part in the broil at the Poivriere had been the Duke de Sairmeuse, he would have disclosed his name—he would have declared that, having been attacked, he had only defended himself—and his name alone would have opened the prison-doors for him. Instead of that, what did the prisoner do? He attempted to kill himself. Would a grand seigneur, like the Duke de Sairmeuse, to whom life must be a perpetual enchantment, have thought of committing suicide?"

A mocking whistle from Father Tabaret interrupted the speaker.

"You seem to have forgotten the last sentence in the paragraph: 'M. Sairmeuse leaves behind him ill-will and hatred.' Do you know the price he might have been compelled to pay for his liberty? No—no more do I. To explain his presence at the Poivriere, and the presence of a woman, who was, perhaps his wife, who knows what disgraceful secrets he would be obliged to betray? Between shame and suicide, he chose suicide. He wished to save his name and his honor intact."

Father Tirauclair spoke with such vehemence that even old Father Absinthe was deeply impressed, although, to tell the truth, he had understood but little of the conversation.

He was now delighted and confident.

As for Lecoq, he rose, very pale, his lips trembling a little—like a man who had just taken an invincible determination.

"You will excuse my hypocrisy, Father Tabaret," he said, in an agitated voice. "I had thought of all this—but I distrusted myself. I wished to hear you say it."

Then with an imperious gesture, he added:

"Now, I know what I have to do."

Father Tabaret lifted his hands toward heaven with every sign of intense dismay.

"Unhappy man!" he exclaimed; "do you think of going to arrest the Duke de Sairmeuse? Poor Lecoq! Free, this man is almost omnipotent, and you, an infinitesimal agent of police, will be broken like glass. Take care, my boy, do not attack the duke. I would not be responsible, even for your life."

The young detective shook his head.

"Oh! I do not deceive myself," said he. "I know that the duke is far beyond my reach. But he will be in my power again on the day I learn his secret. I do not fear danger; but I know, if I would succeed, I must conceal myself—I will conceal myself then. Yes, I will remain in shadow until the day when I can remove the veil from this mystery—then, I will appear in my true character. And if May is really the Duke de Sairmeuse—I shall have my revenge."

THE HONOR OF THE NAME.

CHAPTER XLIV.

On the first Sunday in the month of August, 1815, at ten o'clock precisely—as on every Sunday morning—the sacristan of the parish church at Sairmeuse sounded the three strokes of the bell which warn the faithful that the priest is ascending the steps of the altar to celebrate high mass.

The church was already more than half full, and from every side little groups of peasants were hurrying into the church-yard. The women were all in their bravest attire, with cunning little *fichus* crossed upon their breasts, broad-striped, brightly-colored skirts, and large white *coifs*.

Being as economical as they were coquettish, they came barefooted, bringing

their shoes in their hands, but put them on reverentially before entering the house of God.

But few of the men entered the church. They remained outside to talk, seating themselves in the porch, or standing about the yard, in the shade of the century-old elms.

For such was the custom in the hamlet of Sairmeuse.

The two hours which the women consecrated to prayer the men employed in discussing the news, the success or the failure of the crops; and, before the service ended, they could generally be found, glass in hand, in the bar-room of the village inn.

For the farmers for a league around, the Sunday mass was only an excuse for a reunion, a sort of weekly bourse.

All the *cures* who had been successively stationed at Sairmeuse, had endeavored to put an end to this scandalous habit, as they termed it; but all their efforts had made no impression upon country obstinacy.

They had succeeded in gaining only one concession. At the moment of the elevation of the Host, voices were hushed, heads uncovered, and a few even bowed the knee, and made the sign of the cross.

But this was the affair of an instant only, and conversation was immediately resumed with increased vivacity.

But to-day the usual animation was wanting.

No sounds came from the little knots of men gathered here and there, not an oath, not a laugh. Between buyers and sellers, one did not overhear a single one of those interminable discussions, punctuated with the popular oaths, such as: "By my faith in God!" or, "May the devil burn me!"

They were not talking, they were whispering together. A gloomy sadness was visible upon each face; lips were placed cautiously at the listener's ear; anxiety could be read in every eye.

One scented misfortune in the very air.

Only a month had elapsed since Louis XVIII. had been, for the second time, installed in the Tuileries by a triumphant coalition.

The earth had not yet had time to swallow the sea of blood that flowed at Waterloo; twelve hundred thousand foreign soldiers desecrated the soil of France; the Prussian General Muffling was Governor of Paris.

And the peasantry of Sairmeuse trembled with indignation and fear.

This king, brought back by the allies, was no less to be dreaded than the allies themselves.

To them this great name of Bourbon signified only a terrible burden of taxation and oppression.

Above all, it signified ruin—for there was scarcely one among them who had not purchased some morsel of government land; and they were assured now that all estates were to be returned to the former proprietors, who had emigrated after the overthrow of the Bourbons.

Hence it was with a feverish curiosity that most of them clustered around a young man who, only two days before, had returned from the army.

With tears of rage in his eyes, he was recounting the shame and the misery of the invasion.

He told of the pillage at Versailles, the exactions at Orleans, and the pitiless requisitions that had stripped the people of everything.

"And these accursed foreigners to whom the traitors have delivered us, will not go so long as a shilling or a bottle of wine is left in France!" he exclaimed.

As he said this he shook his clenched fist menacingly at a white flag that floated from the tower.

His generous anger won the close attention of his auditors, and they were still listening to him with undiminished interest, when the sound of a horse's hoofs resounded upon the stones of the only street in Sairmeuse.

A shudder traversed the crowd. The same fear stopped the beating of every heart.

Who could say that this rider was not some English or Prussian officer? He had come, perhaps, to announce the arrival of his regiment, and imperiously demand money, clothing, and food for his soldiers.

But the suspense was not of long duration.

The rider proved to be a fellow-countryman, clad in a torn and dirty blue linen blouse. He was urging forward, with repeated blows, a little, bony, nervous mare, covered with foam.

"Ah! it is Father Chupin," murmured one of the peasants with a sigh of relief.

"The same," observed another. "He seems to be in a terrible hurry."

"The old rascal has probably stolen the horse he is riding."

This last remark disclosed the reputation Father Chupin enjoyed among his neighbors.

He was, indeed, one of those thieves who are the scourge and the terror of the rural districts. He pretended to be a day-laborer, but the truth was that he held all work in holy horror, and spent all his time in sleeping and idling about his hovel. Hence stealing was the only means of support for himself, his wife, and two sons—terrible youths, who, somehow, had escaped the conscription.

They consumed nothing that was not stolen. Wheat, wine, fuel, fruits—all were the rightful property of others.

Hunting and fishing at all seasons, and with forbidden appliances, furnished them with ready money.

Every one in the neighborhood knew this; and yet when Father Chupin was pursued and captured, as he was occasionally, no witness could be found to testify against him.

"He is a hard case," men said, "and if he had a grudge against any one, he would be quite capable of lying in ambush and shooting him as he would a squirrel."

Meanwhile the rider had drawn rein at the inn of the Bœuf Couronne.

He alighted from his horse, and crossing the square, approached the church.

He was a large man, about fifty years of age, as gnarled and sinewy as the stem of an old grape-vine. At the first glance one would not have taken him for a scoundrel. His manner was humble and even gentle; but the restlessness of his eye and the expression of his thin lips betrayed diabolical cunning and the coolest calculation.

At any other time this despised and dreaded individual would have been avoided; but curiosity and anxiety led the crowd toward him.

"Ah, well, Father Chupin!" they cried as soon as he was within the sound of their voices, "whence do you come in such haste?"

"From the city."

To the inhabitants of Sairmeuse and its environs, "the city" meant the country town of the arrondissement, Montaignac, a charming sub-prefecture of eight thousand souls, about four leagues distant.

"And was it at Montaignac that you bought the horse you were riding just now?"

"I did not buy it; it was loaned to me."

This was such a strange assertion that his listeners could not repress a smile. He did not seem to notice it however.

"It was loaned me," he continued, "in order that I might bring some great news here the quicker."

Fear resumed possession of the peasantry.

"Is the enemy in the city?" anxiously inquired some of the more timid.

"Yes, but not the enemy you refer to. This is the former lord of the manor, the Duke de Sairmeuse."

"Ah! they said he was dead."

"They were mistaken."

"Have you seen him?"

"No, *I* have not seen him, but some one else has seen him for me, and has spoken to him. And this some one is M. Laugeron, the proprietor of the Hotel de France at Montaignac. I was passing the house this morning, when he called me. 'Here, old man,' he said, 'do you wish to do me a favor?' Naturally I replied: 'Yes.' Whereupon he placed a coin in my hand and said: 'Well! go and tell them to saddle a horse for you, then gallop to Sairmeuse, and tell my friend Lacheneur that the Duke de Sairmeuse arrived here last night in a post-chaise, with his son M. Martial, and two servants.'"

Here, in the midst of these peasants, who were listening to him with pale cheeks and set teeth, Father Chupin preserved the subdued mien appropriate to a messenger of misfortune.

But if one had observed him carefully, one would have detected an ironical smile upon his lips, and a gleam of malicious joy in his eyes.

He was, in fact, inwardly jubilant. At that moment he had his revenge for all the slights and all the scorn he had been forced to endure. And what a revenge!

And if his words seemed to fall slowly and reluctantly from his lips, it was only because he was trying to prolong the sufferings of his auditors as much as possible.

But a robust young fellow, with an intelligent face, who, perhaps, read Father Chupin's secret heart, brusquely interrupted him.

"What does the presence of the Duke de Sairmeuse at Montaignac matter to us?" he exclaimed. "Let him remain at the Hotel de France as long as he chooses; we shall not go in search of him."

"No! we shall not go in search of him," echoed the other peasants, approvingly.

The old rogue shook his head with affected commiseration.

"Monsieur le Duc will not put you to that trouble," he replied; "he will be here in less than two hours."

"How do you know?"

"I know it through M. Laugeron, who, when I mounted his horse, said to me: 'Above all, old man, explain to my friend Lacheneur that the duke has ordered horses to be in readiness to convey him to Sairmeuse at eleven o'clock.'"

"With a common movement, all the peasants who had watches consulted them."

"And what does he want here?" demanded the same young farmer.

"Pardon!—he did not tell me," replied Father Chupin, "but one need not be very cunning to guess. He comes to revisit his former estates, and to take them from those who have purchased them, if possible. From you, Rousselet, he will claim the meadows upon the Oiselle, which always yield two crops; from you, Father Gauchais, the ground upon which the Croix-Brulee stands; from you, Chanlouineau, the vineyards on the Borderie——"

Chanlouineau was the impetuous young man who had interrupted Father Chupin twice already.

"Claim the Borderie!" he exclaimed, with even greater violence; "let him try—and we will see. It was waste land when my father bought it—covered with briers; even a goat could not have found pasture there. We have cleared it of stones, we have scratched up the soil with our very nails, we have watered it with our sweat, and now they would try to take it from us! Ah! they shall have my last drop of blood first."

"I do not say but——"

"But what? Is it any fault of ours that the nobles fled to foreign lands? We have not stolen their lands, have we? The government offered them for sale; we bought them, and paid for them; they are lawfully ours."

"That is true; but M. de Sairmeuse is the great friend of the king."

The young soldier, whose voice had aroused the most noble sentiments only a moment before, was forgotten.

Invaded France, the threatening enemy, were alike forgotten. The all-powerful instinct of avarice was suddenly aroused.

"In my opinion," resumed Chanlouineau, "we should do well to consult the Baron d'Escorval."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the peasants; "let us go at once!"

They were starting, when a villager who sometimes read the papers, checked them by saying:

"Take care what you do. Do you not know that since the return of the Bourbons M. d'Escorval is of no account whatever? Fouche has him upon the proscription list, and he is under the surveillance of the police."

This objection dampened the enthusiasm.

"That is true," murmured some of the older men, "a visit to M. d'Escorval would, perhaps, do us more harm than good. And, besides, what advice could he give us?"

Chanlouineau had forgotten all prudence.

"What of that!" he exclaimed. "If M. d' Escorval has no counsel to give us about this matter, he can, perhaps, teach us how to resist and to defend ourselves."

For some moments Father Chupin had been studying, with an impassive countenance, the storm of anger he had aroused. In his secret heart he experienced the satisfaction of the incendiary at the sight of the flames he has kindled.

Perhaps he already had a presentiment of the infamous part he would play a few months later.

Satisfied with his experiment, he assumed, for the time, the role of moderator.

"Wait a little. Do not cry before you are hurt," he exclaimed in an ironical tone. Who told you that the Duke de Sairmeuse would trouble you? How much of his former domain do you all own between you? Almost nothing. A few fields and meadows, and a hill on the Borderie. All these together did not in former times yield him an income of five thousand francs a year."

"Yes, that is true," replied Chanlouineau; "and if the revenue you mention is quadrupled, it is only because the land is now in the hands of forty proprietors who cultivate it themselves."

"Another reason why the duke will not say a word; he will not wish to set the whole district in commotion. In my opinion he will dispossess only one of the owners of his former estates, and that is our worthy ex-mayor—M. Lacheneur, in short."

Ah! he knew only too well the egotism of his compatriots. He knew with what complacency and eagerness they would accept an expiatory victim whose sacrifice should be their salvation.

"That is a fact," remarked an old man; "M. Lacheneur owns nearly all the Sairmeuse property."

"Say all, while you are about it," rejoined Father Chupin. "Where does M. Lacheneur live? In that beautiful Chateau de Sairmeuse whose gable we can see there through the trees. He hunts in the forests which once belonged to the Duke de Sairmeuse; he fishes in their lakes; he drives the horses which once belonged to them, in the carriages upon which one could now see their coat of arms, if it had not been painted out.

"Twenty years ago, Lacheneur was a poor devil like myself; now, he is a grand gentleman with fifty thousand livres a year. He wears the finest broadcloth, and top-boots like the Baron d'Escorval. He no longer works; he makes others work; and when he passes every one must bow to the earth. If you kill so much as a sparrow upon his lands, as he says, he will cast you into prison. Ah, he has been fortunate. The emperor made him mayor. The Bourbons deprived him of his office; but what does that matter to him? He is still the real master here, as the Sairmeuse were in other days. His son is pursuing his studies in Paris, intending to become a notary. As for his daughter, Mlle. Marie-Anne——"

"Not a word against her!" exclaimed Chanlouineau; "if she were mistress, there would not be a poor man in the country; and yet how some of her pensioners abuse her bounty. Ask your wife if this is not so, Father Chupin."

Undoubtedly the impetuous young man spoke at the peril of his life.

But the wicked old Chupin swallowed this affront which he would never forget, and humbly continued:

"I do not say that Mlle. Marie-Anne is not generous; but after all her charitable work she has plenty of money left for her fine dresses and her fal-lals. I think that M. Lacheneur ought to be very well content, even after he has restored to its former owner one-half or even three-quarters of the property he has acquired, no one can tell how. He would have enough left then to grind the poor under foot,"

After his appeal to selfishness, Father Chupin appealed to envy. There could be no doubt of his success.

But he had not time to pursue his advantage. The services were over, and the worshipers were leaving the church.

Soon there appeared upon the porch the man in question, with a young girl of dazzling beauty leaning upon his arm.

Father Chupin walked straight towards him, and brusquely delivered his message.

M. Lacheneur staggered beneath the blow. He turned first so red, then so frightfully pale, that those around him thought he was about to fall.

But he quickly recovered his self-possession, and without a word to the messenger, he walked rapidly away leading his daughter.

Some minutes later an old post-chaise, drawn by four horses, dashed through the village at a gallop, and paused before the house of the viliage *cure*.

Then one might have witnessed a singular spectacle.

Father Chupin had gathered his wife and his children together, and the four surrounded the carriage, shouting with all the power of their lungs:

"Long live the Duke de Sairmeuse!"

CHAPTER XLV.

A GENTLY ascending road, more than two miles in length, shaded by a quadruple row of venerable elms, led from the village to the Chateau de Sairmeuse.

Nothing could be more beautiful than this avenue, a fit approach to a palace; and the stranger who beheld it, could understand the naively vain proverb of the country: "He does not know the real beauty of France, who has never seen Sairmeuse nor the Oiselle."

The Oiselle is the little river which one crosses by means of a wooden bridge on leaving the village, and whose clear and rapid waters give a delicious freshness to the valley.

At every step, as one ascends, the view changes. It is as if an enchanting panorama were being slowly unrolled before one.

On the right you can see the saw-mills of Fereol. On the left, like an ocean of verdure, the forest of Dolomien trembles in the breeze. Those imposing ruins on the other side of the river are all that remain of the feudal manor of the house of Breulh. That red brick mansion, with granite trimmings, half concealed by a bend in the river, belongs to the Baron d'Escorval.

And if the day is clear, one can easily distinguish the spires of Montaignac in the distance.

This was the path traversed by M. Lacheneur after Chupin had delivered his message.

But what did he care for the beauties of the landscape!

Upon the church porch he had received his death wound; and now, with a tottering and dragging step, he dragged himself along like one of those poor soldiers, mortally wounded upon the field of battle, who go back, seeking a ditch or quiet spot where they can lie down and die.

He seemed to have lost all thought of his surroundings—all consciousness of previous events. He pursued his way, lost in his reflections, guided only by force of habit.

Two or three times his daughter, Marie Anne, who was walking by his side, addressed him; but an "Ah! let me alone!" uttered in a harsh tone, was the only response she could draw from him.

Evidently he had received a terrible blow; and undoubtedly, as often happens under such circumstances, the unfortunate man was reviewing all the different phases of his life.

At twenty Lacheneur was only a poor ploughboy in the service of the Sairmeuse family.

His ambition was modest then. When stretched beneath a tree at the hour of noonday rest, his dreams were as simple as those of an infant.

"If I could but amass a hundred pistoles," he thought, "I would ask Father Barrois for the hand of his daughter Martha; and he would not refuse me."

A hundred pistoles! A thousand francs!—an enormous sum for him who, in two years of toil and privation had only laid by eleven louis, which he had placed carefully in a tiny box and hidden in the depths of his straw mattress.

Still, he did not despair. He had read in Martha's eyes that she would wait.

And Mlle. Armande de Sairmeuse, a rich old maid, was his god-mother; and he thought, if he attacked her adroitly, that he might, perhaps, interest her in his love affair.

Then the terrible storm of the revolution burst over France.

With the fall of the first thunderbolts, the Duke of Sairmeuse left France with the Count d'Artois. They took refuge in foreign lands as a passer-by seeks shelter in a door-way from a summer shower, saying to himself: "This will not last long."

The storm did last, however; and the following year Mlle. Armande, who had remained at Sairmeuse, died.

The chateau was then closed, the president of the district took possession of the keys in the name of the government, and the servants were scattered.

Lacheneur took up his residence in Montaignac.

Young, daring, and personally attractive, blessed with an energetic face, and an intelligence far above his station, it was not long before he became well known in the political clubs.

For three months Lacheneur was the tyrant of Montaignac.

But this *metier* of public speaker is by no means lucrative, so the surprise throughout the district was immense, when it was ascertained that the former ploughboy had purchased the chateau, and almost all the land belonging to his old master.

It is true that the nation had sold this princely domain for scarcely a twentieth part of its real value. The appraisement was sixty-nine thousand francs. It was giving the property away.

And yet, it was necessary to have this amount, and Lacheneur possessed it, since he had poured it in a flood of beautiful louis d'or, into the hands of the receiver of the district.

From that moment his popularity waned. The patriots who had applauded the ploughboy, cursed the capitalist. He discreetly left them to recover from their rage as best they could, and returned to Sairmeuse. There every one bowed low before Citoyen Lacheneur.

Unlike most people, he did not forget his past hopes at the moment when they might be realized.

He married Martha Barrois, and leaving the country to work out its own salvation without his assistance, he gave his time and attention to agriculture.

Any close observer, in those days, would have felt certain that the man was bewildered by the sudden change in his situation.

His manner was so troubled and anxious that one, to see him, would have supposed him a servant in constant fear of being detected in some indiscretion.

He did not open the chateau, but installed himself and his young wife in the cottage formerly occupied by the head game-keeper, near the entrance of the park.

But, little by little, with the habit of possession, came assurance.

The Consulate had succeeded the Directory, the Empire succeeded the Consulate, Citoyen Lacheneur became M. Lacheneur.

Appointed mayor two years later, he left the cottage and took possession of the chateau.

The former ploughboy slumbered in the bed of the Dukes de Sairmeuse; he ate from the massive plate, graven with their coat of arms; he received his visitors in the magnificent *salon* in which the Dukes de Sairmeuse had received their friends in years gone by.

To those who had known him in former days, M. Lacheneur had become unrecognizable. He had adapted himself to his lofty station. Blushing at his own ignorance, he had found the courage —wonderful in one of his age—to acquire the education which he lacked.

Then, all his undertakings were successful to such a degree that his good fortune had become proverbial. That he took any part in an enterprise, sufficed to make it turn out well.

His wife had given him two lovely children, a son and a daughter.

His property, managed with a shrewdness and sagacity which the former owners had not possessed, yielded him an income of at least sixty thousand francs.

How many under similar circumstances, would have lost their heads! But he, M. Lacheneur, had been wise enough to retain his *sang-froid.*

In spite of the princely luxury that surrounded him, his own habits were simple and frugal. He had never had an attendant for his own person. His large income he consecrated almost entirely to the improvement of his estate or to the purchase of more land. And yet, he was not avaricious. In all that concerned his wife or children, he did not count the cost. His son, Jean, had been educated in Paris; he wished him to be fitted for any position. Unwilling to consent to a separation from his daughter, he had procured a governess to take charge of her education.

Sometimes his friends accused him of an inordinate ambition for his children; but he always shook his head sadly, as he replied:

"If I can only ensure them a modest and comfortable future! But what folly it is to count upon the future. Thirty years ago, who could have foreseen that the Sairmuese family would be deprived of their estates?"

With such opinions he should have been a good master; he was, but no one thought the better of him on that account. His former comrades could not forgive him for his sudden elevation.

They seldom spoke of him without wishing his ruin in ambiguous words.

Alas! the evil days came. Towards the close of the year 1812, he lost his wife; the disasters of the year 1813 swept away a large portion of his personal fortune, which had been invested in a manufacturing enterprise. Compromised by the first Restoration, he was obliged to conceal himself for a time; and to cap the climax the conduct of his son, who was still in Paris, caused him serious disquietude.

Only the evening before, he had thought himself the most unfortunate of men.

But here was another misfortune menacing him; a misfortune so terrible that all the others were forgotten.

From the day on which he had purchased Sairmeuse, to this fatal Sunday in August, 1815, was an interval of twenty years.

Twenty years! And it seemed to him only yesterday that, blushing and trembling, he had laid those piles of louis d'or upon the desk of the receiver of the district.

Had he dreamed it?

He had not dreamed it. His entire life, with its struggles and its miseries, its hopes and its fears, its unexpected joys and its blighted hopes, all passed before him.

Lost in these memories, he had quite forgotten the present situation, when a commonplace incident, more powerful than the voice of his daughter, brought him back to the terrible reality.

The gate leading to the Chateau de Sairmeuse, to *his* chateau, was found to be locked.

He shook it with a sort of rage; and being unable to break the fastening, he found some relief in breaking the bell.

On hearing the noise, the gardener came running to the scene of action.

"Why is this gate closed?" demanded M. Lacheneur, with unwonted violence of manner. "By what right do you barricade my house when I, the master, am without?"

The gardener tried to make some excuse.

"Hold your tongue!" interrupted M. Lacheneur. "I dismiss you; you are no longer in my service."

He passed on, leaving the gardener petrified with astonishment, crossed the court-yard—a court-yard worthy of the mansion, bordered with velvet turf, with flowers, and with dense shrubbery.

In the vestibule, inlaid with marble, three of his tenants sat awaiting him, for it was on Sunday that he always received the workmen who desired to confer with him.

They rose at his approach, and removed their hats deferentially. But he did not give them time to utter a word.

"Who permitted you to enter here?" he said, savagely, "and what do you desire? They sent you to play the spy on me, did they? Leave, I tell you!"

The three farmers were even more bewildered and dismayed than the gardener had been, and their remarks must have been interesting.

But M. Lacheneur could not hear them. He had opened the door of the grand *salon*, and dashed in, followed by his frightened daughter.

Never had Marie-Anne seen her father in such a mood; and she trembled, her heart torn by the most frightful presentiments.

She had heard it said that oftentimes, under the influence of some dire calamity, unfortunate men have suddenly lost their reason entirely, and she was wondering if her father had become insane.

It would seem, indeed, that such was the case. His eyes flashed, convulsive shudders shook his whole body, a white foam gathered on his lips.

He made the circuit of the room as a wild beast makes the circuit of his cage, uttering harsh imprecations and making frenzied gestures.

His actions were strange, incomprehensible. Sometimes he seemed to be trying the thickness of the carpet with the toe of his boot; sometimes he threw himself upon a sofa or a chair, as if to test its softness.

Occasionally, he paused abruptly before some one of the valuable pictures that covered the walls, or before a bronze. One might have supposed that he was taking an inventory, and appraising all the magnificent and costly articles which decorated this apartment, the most sumptuous in the chateau.

"And I must renounce all this!" he exclaimed, at last.

These words explained everything.

"No, never!" he resumed, in a transport of rage—"never! never! I cannot! I will not!"

Now Marie-Anne understood it all. But what was passing in her father's mind? She wished to know; and leaving the low chair in which she had been seated, she went to her father's side.

"Are you ill, father?" she asked, in her sweet voice; "what is the matter? What do you fear? Why do you not confide in me—am I not your daughter? Do you no longer love me?"

At the sound of this dear voice, M. Lacheneur trembled like a sleeper suddenly aroused from the terrors of a nightmare, and he cast an indescribable glance upon his daughter.

"Did you not hear what Chupin said to me?" he replied, slowly. "The Duke de Sairmeuse is at Montaignac—he will soon be here; and we are dwelling in the chat-

eau of his fathers, and his domain has become ours!"

The vexed question regarding the national lands, which agitated France for thirty years, Marie understood, for she had heard it discussed a thousand times.

"Ah, well! dear father," said she, what does that matter, even if we do hold the property? You have bought it and paid for it, have you not? So it is rightfully and lawfully ours."

M. Lacheneur hesitated a moment before replying.

But his secret suffocated him. He was in one of those crises in which a man, however strong he may be, totters and seeks some support, however fragile.

"You would be right, my daughter," he murmured, with drooping head, "if the money that I gave in exchange for Sairmeuse had really belonged to me."

At this strange avowal the young girl turned pale and recoiled a step.

"What?" she faltered; "this gold was not yours, my father? To whom did it belong? From whence did it come?"

The unhappy man had gone too far to retract.

"I will tell you all, my daughter," he replied, "and you shall judge. You shall decide. When the Sairmeuse family fled from France, I had only my hands to depend upon, and as it was almost impossible to obtain work, I wondered if starvation were not near at hand.

"Such was my condition when some one came after me one evening to tell me that Mlle. Armande de Sairmeuse, my godmother, was dying, and wished to speak with me. I ran to the chateau.

"The messenger had told the truth. Mlle. Armande was sick unto death. I felt this on seeing her upon her bed, whiter than wax.

"Ah! if I were to live a hundred years, never should I forget her face as it looked at that moment. It was expressive of a strength of will and an energy that would hold death at bay until the task upon which she had determined was performed.

"When I entered the room I saw a look of relief appear upon her countenance.

"'How long you were in coming!" she murmured faintly.

"I was about to make some excuse, when she motioned me to pause, and ordered the women who surrounded her to leave the room.

"As soon as we were alone:

"'You are an honest boy,' said she, 'and I am about to give you a proof of my confidence. People believe me to be poor, but they are mistaken. While my relatives were gayly ruining themselves, I was saving the five hundred louis which the duke, my brother, gave me each year.'

"She motioned me to come nearer, and to kneel beside her bed.

"I obeyed, and Mlle. Armande leaned towards me, almost glued her lips to my ear, and added:

"'I possess eighty thousand francs.'

"I felt a sudden giddiness, but my god-mother did not notice it.

"'This amount,' she continued, 'is not a quarter part of the former income from our family estates. But now, who knows but it will, one day, be the only resource of the Sairmeuse? I am going to place it in your charge, Lacheneur. I confide it to your honor and to your devotion. The estates belonging to the emigrants are to be sold, I hear. If such an act of injustice is committed, you will probably be able to purchase our property for seventy thousand francs. If the property is sold by the government, purchase it; if the lands belonging to the emigrants are not sold, take that amount to the duke, my brother, who is with the Count d'Artois. The surplus, that is to say, the ten thousand francs remaining, I give to you—they are yours.'

"She seemed to recover her strength. She raised herself in bed, and holding the crucifix attached to her rosary to my lips, she said:

"'Swear by she image of our Saviour, that you will faithfully execute the last will of your dying god-mother.'"

"I took the required oath, and an expression of satisfaction overspread her features.

"'That is well,' she said: 'I shall die content. You will have a protector on high. But this is not all. In times like these in which we live, this gold will not be safe in your hands unless those about you are ignorant that you possess it. I have been endeavoring to discover some way by which you could remove it from my room, and from the chateau, without the knowledge of any one; and I have found a way. The gold is here in this cupboard at the head of my bed, in a stout oaken chest. You must find strength to move the chest—you must. You can fasten a sheet around it, and let it down gently from the window into the garden. You will then leave the house as you entered it, and as soon as you are outside, you must take the chest and carry it to your home. The night is very dark, and no one will see you, if you are careful. But make haste; my strength is nearly gone.'"

"The chest was heavy, but I was very strong."

"In less than ten minutes the task of removing the chest from the chateau was accomplished, without a single sound that would betray us. As I closed the window, I said:

"'It is done, god-mother.'

"'God be praised!' she whispered, Sairmeuse is saved!'

"I heard a deep sigh. I turned; she was dead."

This scene that M. Lacheneur was relating, rose vividly before him.

To feign, to disguise the truth, or to conceal any portion of it was an impossibility.

He forgot himself and his daughter; he thought only of the dead woman, of Mlle. Armande de Sairmeuse.

And he shuddered on pronouncing the words: "She was dead." It seemed to him that she was about to speak, and to insist upon the fulfillment of his pledge.

After a moment's silence, he resumed, in a hollow voice:

"I called for aid—it came. Mlle. Armand was adored by every one; there was great lamentation, and a half hour of indescribable confusion followed her death. I was able to withdraw, unnoticed, to run into the garden, and to carry away the oaken chest. An hour later, it was concealed in the miserable hovel in which I dwelt. The following year I purchased Sairmeuse."

He had confessed all; and he paused trembling, trying to read his sentence in the eyes of his daughter.

"And can you hesitate?" she demanded.

"Ah! you do not know——"

"I know that Sairmeuse must be given up."

This was the decree of his own conscience, that faint voice which speaks only in a whisper, but which all the tumult on earth cannot overpower.

"No one saw me take away the chest," he faltered. "If any one suspected it, there is not a single proof against me. But no one does suspect it."

Marie Anne rose, her eyes flashed with generous indignation.

"My father!" she exclaimed, "oh! my father!"

Then in a calmer tone, she added:

"If others know nothing of this, can *you* forget it?"

M. Lacheneur appeared almost ready to succumb to the torture of the terrible conflict raging in his soul.

"Return!" he exclaimed. "What shall I return? That which I have received? So be it. I consent. I will give the duke the eighty thousand francs; to this amount I will add the interest on this sum since I have had it, and—we shall be free of all obligation."

The girl sadly shook her head.

"Why do you resort to subterfuges which are so unworthy of you?" she asked, gently. "You know perfectly well that it was Sairmeuse which Mlle. Armande intended to entrust to the servant of her house. And it is Sairmeuse which must be returned."

The word "servant" was revolting to a man, who, at least, while the empire endured, had been a power in the land.

"Ah! you are cruel, my daughter," he said, with intense bitterness, "as cruel as a child who has never suffered—as cruel as one who, having never himself been tempted, is without mercy for those who have yielded to temptation.

"It is one of those acts which God alone can judge, since God alone can read the depths of one's secret soul.

"I am only a depositary, you tell me. It was, indeed, in this light that I formerly regarded myself.

"If your poor sainted mother was still alive, she would tell you the anxiety and anguish I felt on being made the master of riches which were not mine. I trembled lest I should yield to their seductions; I was afraid of myself. I felt as a gambler might feel who had the winnings of others confided to his care; as a drunkard might feel who had been placed in charge of a quantity of the most delicious wines.

"Your mother would tell you that I moved heaven and earth to find the Duke de Sairmeuse. But he had left the Count d'Artois, and no one knew where he had gone or what had become of him. Ten years passed before I could make up my mind to inhabit the chateau—yes, ten years—during which I had the furniture dusted each morning as if the master was to return that evening.

"At last I ventured. I had heard M. d'Escorval declare that the duke had been killed in battle. I took up my abode here. And from day to day, in proportion as the domain of Sairmeuse became more beautiful and extensive beneath my care, I felt myself more and more its rightful owner.

But this dispairing pleading in behalf of a bad cause produced no impression upon Marie-Anne's loyal heart.

"Restitution must be made," she repeated.

M. Lacheneur wrung his hands.

"Implacable!" he exclaimed; "she is implacable. Unfortunate girl! does she not understand that it is for her sake I wish to remain where I am. I am old; and I am familiar with toil and poverty; idleness has not removed the callosities from my hands. What do I require to keep me alive until the day comes for me to take my place in the graveyard? A crust of bread and an onion in the morning, a porringer of soup in the evening, and for the night a bundle of straw. I could easily earn that. But you, unhappy child! and your brother, what will become of you?"

"We must not discuss nor haggle with duty, my father. I think, however, that you are needlessly alarmed. I believe the duke is too noble-hearted ever to allow you to suffer want after the immense service you have rendered him."

The old servitor of the house of Sairmeuse laughed a loud, bitter laugh.

"You believe that!" said he, "Then you do not know the nobles who have been our masters for ages. 'A., you are a worthy fellow!'—very coldly said—will be the only recompense I shall receive; and you will see us—me, at my plough—you, out at service. And if I venture to speak of the ten thousand francs that were given me, I shall be treated as an impostor, as an impudent fool. By the holy name of God this shall not be!'

"Oh, my father!"

"No! this shall not be. And I realize—as you cannot realize—the disgrace of such a fall. You think you are beloved in Sairmeuse?—you are mistaken. We have been too fortunate not to be the victims of hatred and jealousy. If I fall to-morrow, you will see all who kissed your hands to-day fall upon you to tear you to pieces!"

His eye glittered; he believed he had found a victorious argument.

"And then you, yourself, will realize the horror of the disgrace. It will cost you the deadly anguish of a separation from him whom your heart has chosen."

He had spoken truly, for Marie-Anne's beautiful eyes filled with tears.

"If what you say proves true, father," she murmured, in an altered voice, "I may, perhaps, die of sorrow; but I cannot fail to realize that my confidence and my love has been misplaced."

"And you still insist upon my returning Sairmeuse to its former owner?"

"Honor speaks, my father."

M. Lacheneur made the arm-chair in which he was seated tremble by a violent blow of his fist.

"And if *I* am just as obstinate," he exclaimed—"if I keep the property—what will you do?"

"I shall say to myself, father, that honest poverty is better than stolen wealth. I shall leave this chateau, which belongs to the Duke de Sairmeuse, and I shall seek a situation as a servant in the neighborhood."

M. Lacheneur sank back in his arm-chair sobbing. He knew his daughter's nature well enough to be assured that what she said, that she would do.

But he was conquered: his daughter had won the battle. He had decided to make the heroic sacrifice.

"I will relinquish Sairmeuse," he faltered, "come what may——"

He paused suddenly; a visitor was entering the room.

It was a young man about twenty years of age, of distinguished appearance, but with a rather melancholy and gentle manner.

His eyes when he entered the apartment encountered those of Marie-Anne; he blushed slightly, and the girl half-turned away, crimsoning to the roots of her hair.

"Monsieur," said the young man, "my father sends me to inform you that the Duke de Sairmeuse and his son have just arrived. They have asked the hospitality of our *cure*."

M. Lacheneur rose, unable to conceal his frightful agitation.

"You will thank the Baron d'Escorval for his attention, my dear Maurice," he responded. "I shall have the honor of seeing him to-day, after a very momentous step which we are about to take, my daughter and I."

Young d'Escorval had seen, at the first glance, that his presence was inopportune, so he remained only a few moments.

But as he was taking leave, Marie-Anne found time to say in a low voice:

"I think I know your heart, Maurice; this evening I shall know it certainly."

CHAPTER XLVI.

FEW of the inhabitants of Sairmeuse knew, except by name, the terrible duke whose arrival had thrown the whole village into commotion.

Some of the oldest residents had a faint recollection of having seen him long ago, before '89 indeed, when he came to visit his aunt, Mlle. Armande.

His duties, then, had seldom permitted him to leave the court.

If he had given no sign of life during the empire, it was because he had not been compelled to submit to the humiliations and suffering which so many of the emigrants were obliged to endure in their exile.

On the contrary, he had received in exchange for the wealth of which he had been deprived by the revolution, a princely fortune.

Taking refuge in London after the defeat of the army of Conde, he had been so fortunate as to please the only daughter of Lord Holland, one of the richest peers in England, and he had married her.

She possessed a fortune of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds sterling, more than six million francs.

Still the marriage was not a happy one. The chosen companion of the dissipated and licentious Count d'Artois, was not likely to prove a very good husband.

The young duchess was contemplating a separation when she died, in giving birth to a boy, who was baptized under the names of Anne-Marie-Martial.

The loss of his wife did not render the Duke de Sairmeuse inconsolable.

He was free and richer than he had ever been.

As soon as *les convenances* permitted, he confided his son to the care of a relative of his wife, and began his roving life again.

Rumor had told the truth. He had fought, and that furiously, against France in the Austrian, and then in the Russian ranks.

And he took no pains to conceal the fact; convinced that he had only performed his duty. He considered that he had honestly and loyally gained the rank of general which the Emperor of all the Russias had bestowed upon him.

He had not returned to France during the first Restoration; but his absence had been involuntary. His father-in-law, Lord Holland, had just died, and the duke was detained in London by business connected with his son's immense inheritance.

Then followed the "Hundred Days." They exasperated him.

But "the good cause," as he styled it, having triumphed anew, he hastened to France.

Alas! Lacheneur judged the character of his former master correctly, when he resisted the entreaties of his daughter.

This man, who had been compelled to conceal himself during the first Restoration, knew only too well, that the returned *emigres* had learned nothing and forgotten nothing.

The Duke de Sairmeuse was no exception to the rule.

He thought, and nothing could be more sadly absurd, that a mere act of authority would suffice to suppress forever, all the events of the Revolution and of the empire.

When he said: "I do not admit that!" he firmly believed that there was nothing more to be said; that controversy was ended; and that what *had* been was as if it had never been.

If some, who had seen Louis XVIII. at the helm in 1814, assured the duke that France had changed in many respects since 1789, he responded with a shrug of the shoulders:

"Nonsense! As soon as we assert ourselves, all these rascals whose rebellion alarms you, will quietly slink out of sight."

Such was really his opinion.

On the way from Montaignac to Sairmeuse, the duke, comfortably ensconced in his berlin, unfolded his theories for the benefit of his son.

"The king has been poorly advised," he said, in conclusion. "Besides, I am disposed to believe that he inclines too much to Jacobinism. If he would listen to my advice, he would make use of the twelve hundred thousand soldiers which our friends have placed at his disposal, to bring his subjects to a sense of their duty. Twelve hundred thousand bayonets have far more eloquence than the articles of a charter."

He continued his remarks on this subject until the carriage approached Sairmeuse.

Though but little given to sentiment, he was really affected by the sight of the country in which he was born—where he had played as a child, and of which he had heard nothing since the death of his aunt.

Everything was changed: still the outlines of the landscape remained the same; the valley of the Oiselle was as bright and laughing as in days gone by.

"I recognize it!" he exclaimed, with a delight that made him forget politics. "I recognize it!"

Soon the changes became more striking.

The carriage entered Sairmeuse, and rattled over the stones of the only street in the village.

This street, in former years, had been unpaved, and had always been rendered impassable by wet weather.

"Ah, ha!" murmured the duke, "this is an improvement!"

It was not long before he noticed others. The dilapidated, thatched hovels had given place to pretty and comfortable white cottages with green blinds, and a vine hanging gracefully over the door.

As the carriage passed the public square in front of the church, Martial observed the groups of peasants who were still talking there.

"What do you think of all these peasants?" he inquired of his father. "Do they have the appearance of people who are preparing a triumphal reception for their old masters?"

M. de Sairmeuse shrugged his shoulders. He was not the man to renounce an illusion for such a trifle.

"They do not know that I am in this post-chaise," he replied. "When they know——"

Shouts of "Vive M. le Duc de Sairmeuse!" interrupted him.

"Do you her that, marquis?" he exclaimed.

And pleased by these cries that proved him in the right, he leaned from the carriage-window, waving his hand to the honest Chupin family, who were running after the vehicle with noisy shouts.

The old rascal, his wife, and his children, all possessed powerful voices; and,

it was not strange that the duke believed the whole village was welcoming him. He was convinced of it; and when the berlin stopped before the house of the *cure*, M. de Sairmeuse was persuaded that the *prestige* of the nobility was greater than ever.

Upon the threshold of the parsonage, Bibiaine, the old housekeeper, was standing. She knew who these guests must be, for the *crue's* servants always know what is going on.

"Monsieur has not yet returned from church," she said, in response to the duke's inquiry; "but if the gentlemen wish to wait, it will not be long before he comes, for the poor, dear man has not breakfasted yet."

"Let us go in," the duke said to his son.

And guided by the housekeeper, they entered a sort of drawing-room, where the table was spread.

M. de Sairmeuse took an inventory of the apartment in a single glance. The habits of a house reveal those of its master. This was clean, poor, and bare. The walls were whitewashed; a dozen chairs composed the entire furniture; upon the table, laid with monastic simplicity, were only tin dishes.

This was either the abode of an ambitious man or a saint.

"Will these gentlemen take any refreshments?" inquired Bibiaine.

"Upon my word," replied Martial, "I must confess that the drive has whetted my appetite amazingly."

"Blessed Jesus!" exclaimed the old housekeeper, in evident despair. "What am I to do? I, who have nothing! That is to say—yes—I have an old hen left in the coop. Give me time to wring its neck, to pick it, and clean it——"

She paused to listen, and they heard a step in the passage.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "here is Monsieur le Cure now!"

The son of a poor farmer in the environs of Montaignac, he owed his Latin and tonsure to the privations of his family.

Tall, angular, and solemn, he was as cold and impassive as the stones of his church.

By what immense efforts of will, at the cost of what torture, had he made himself what he was? One could form some idea of the terrible restraint to which he had subjected himself by looking at his eyes, which occasionally emitted the lightnings of an impassioned soul.

Was he old or young? The most subtle observer would have hesitated to say on seeing this pallid and emaciated face, cut in two by an immense nose—a real eagle's beak—as thin as the edge of a razor.

He wore a white cassock, which had been patched and darned in numberless places, but which was a marvel of cleanliness, and which hung about his tall, attenuated body like the sails of a disabled vessel.

He was known as the Abbe Midon.

At the sight of the two strangers seated in his drawing-room, he manifested some slight surprise.

The carriage standing before the door had announced the presence of a visitor; but he had expected to find one of his parishioners.

No one had warned him or the sacristan, and he was wondering with whom he had to deal, and what they desired of him.

Mechanically, he turned to Bibiaine, but the old servant had taken flight.

The duke understood his hosts astonishment.

"Upon my word, abbe!" he said, with the impertinent ease of a *grand siegneur* who makes himself at home everywhere, "we have taken your house by storm, and hold the position. as you see. I am the Duke de Sairmeuse, and this is my son, the marquis.

The priest bowed, but he did not seem very greatly impressed by the exalted rank of his guests.

"It is a great honor for me," he replied, in a more than reserved tone, "to receive a visit from the former master of this place."

He emphasized this word "former," in such a manner that it was impossible to doubt his sentiments and his opinions.

"Unfortunately," he continued, "you will not find here the comforts to which you are accustomed, and I fear——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the duke. "An old soldier is not fastidious, and what suffices for you, Monsieur Abbe, will suffice for us. And rest assured that we shall amply repay you in one way or another for any inconvenience we may cause you."

The priest's eye flashed. This want of tact, this disagreeable familiarity, this last insulting remark, kindled the anger of the man concealed beneath the priest.

"Besides," added Martial, gayly, "we have been vastly amused by Bibiaine's anxieties, we already know that there is a chicken in the coop——"

"That is to say there was one, Monsieur le Marquis."

The old housekeeper, who suddenly reappeared, explained her master's response. She seemed overwhelmed with despair.

"Blessed Virgin! monsieur, what shall I do?" she clamored. "The chicken has disappeared. Some one has certainly stolen it, for the coop is securely closed!"

"Do not accuse your neighbor hastily," interrupted the *cure*; "no one has stolen it from us. Bertrande was here this morning to ask alms in the name of her

sick daughter. I had no money, and I gave her this fowl that she might make a good *bouillon* for the sick girl."

This explanation changed Bibiaine's consternation to fury.

Planting herself in the centre of the room, one hand upon her hip, and gesticulating wildly with the other, she exclaimed, pointing to her master:

"That is just the sort of man he is; he has less sense than a baby! Any miserable peasant who meets him can make him believe anything he wishes. Any great falsehood brings tears to his eyes, and then they can do what they like with him. In that way they take the very shoes off his feet and the bread from his mouth. Bertrande's daughter, messieurs, is no more ill than you or I!"

"Enough," said the priest, sternly, "enough." Then, knowing by experience that his voice had not the power to check her flood of reproaches, he took her by the arm and led her out into the passage.

M. de Sairmeuse and his son exchanged a glance of consternation.

Was this a comedy that had been prepared for their benefit? Evidently not, since their arrival had not been expected.

But the priest, whose character had been so plainly revealed by this quarrel with his domestic, was not a man to their taste.

At least, he was evidently not the man they had hoped to find—not the auxiliary whose assistance was indispensable to the success of their plans.

Yet they did not exchange a word; they listened.

They heard the sound as of a discussion in the passage. The master spoke in low tones, but with an unmistakable accent of command; the servant uttered an astonished exclamation.

But the listeners could not distinguish a word.

Soon the priest re-entered the apartment.

"I hope, gentlemen," he said, with a dignity that could not fail to check any attempt at raillery, "that you will excuse this ridiculous scene. The *cure* of Sairmeuse, thank God! is not so poor as she says."

Neither the duke nor Martial made any response.

Even their remarkable assurance was very sensibly diminished; and M. de Sairmeuse deemed it advisable to change the subject.

This he did, by relating the events which he had just witnessed in Paris, and by insisting that his majesty, Louis XVIII., had been welcomed with enthusiasm and transports of affection.

Fortunately, the old housekeeper interrupted this recital.

She entered, loaded with china, silver, and bottles, and behind her came a large man in a white apron, bearing three or four covered dishes in his hands.

It was the order to go and obtain this repast from the village inn which had drawn from Bibiaine so many exclamations of wonder and dismay in the passage.

A moment later the *cure* and his guests took their places at the table.

Had the much-lamented chicken constituted the dinner the rations would have been "short." This the worthy woman was obliged to confess, on seeing the terrible appetite evinced by M. de Sairmeuse and his son.

"One would have sworn that they had eaten nothing for a fortnight," she told her friends, the next day.

Abbe Midon was not hungry, though it was two o'clock, and he had eaten nothing since the previous evening.

The sudden arrival of the former masters of Sairmeuse filled his heart with gloomy forebodings. Their coming, he believed, presaged the greatest misfortunes.

So while he played with his knife and fork, pretending to eat, he was really occupied in watching his guests, and in studying them with all the penetration of a priest, which, by the way, is generally far superior to that of a physician or of a magistrate.

The Duke de Sairmeuse was fifty-seven, but looked considerably younger.

The storms of his youth, the dissipation of his riper years, the great excesses of every kind in which he had indulged, had not impaired his iron constitution in the least.

Of herculean build, he was extremely proud of his strength, and of his hands, which were well-formed, but large, firmly knit and powerful, such hands as rightfully belonged to a gentleman whose ancestors had given many a crushing blow with ponderous battle-axe in the crusades.

His face revealed his character. He possessed all the graces and all the vices of a courtier.

He was, at the same time *spirituel* and ignorant, skeptical and violently imbued with the prejudices of his class.

Though less robust than his father, Martial was a no less distinguished looking cavalier. It was not strange that women raved over his blue eyes, and the beautiful blonde hair which he inherited from his mother.

To his father he owed energy, courage, and, it must also be added, perversity. But he was his superior in education and in intellect. If he shared his father's prejudices, he had not adopted them without weighing them carefully. What the father might do in a moment of ex-

citement, the son was capable of doing in cold blood.

It was thus that the abbe, with rare sagacity, read the character of his guests.

So it was with great sorrow, but without surprise, that he heard the duke advance, on the questions of the day, the impossible ideas shared by nearly all the *emigres*.

Knowing the condition of the country, and the state of public opinion, the *cure* endeavored to convince the obstinate man of his mistake; but upon this subject, the duke would not permit contradiction, or even raillery; and he was fast losing his temper, when Bibiaine appeared at the parlor door.

"Monsieur le Duc," said she, "M. Lacheneur and his daughter are without and desire to speak to you."

CHAPTER XLVII.

THIS name Lacheneur awakened no recollection in the mind of the duke.

First, he had never lived at Sairmeuse.

And even if he had, what courtier of the *ancien regime* ever troubled himself about the individual names of the peasants, whom he regarded with such profound indifference.

When a *grand seigneur* addressed these people, he said: "Halloo! hi, there! friend, my worthy fellow!"

So it was with the air of a man who is making an effort of memory that the Duke de Sairmeuse repeated:

"Lacheneur—M. Lacheneur——"

But Martial, a closer observer than his father, had noticed that the priest's glance wavered at the sound of this name.

"Who is this person, abbe?" demanded the duke, lightly.

"M. Lacheneur," replied the priest with very evident hesitation, "is the present owner of the Chateau de Sairmeuse."

Martial, the precocious diplomat, could not repress a smile on hearing this response, which he had foreseen. But the duke bounded from his chair.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "it is the rascal who has had the impudence——Let him come in, old woman, let him come in."

Bibiaine retired, and the priest's uneasiness increased.

"Permit me, Monsieur le Duc," he said, hastily, "to remark that M. Lacheneur exercises a great influence in this region—to offend him would be impolitic——"

"I understand—you advise me to be conciliatory. Such sentiments are purely Jacobin. If his majesty listens to the advice of such as you, all these sales of confiscated estates will be ratified. Zounds! our interests are the same. If the Revolution has deprived the nobility of their property, it has also impoverished the clergy."

"The possessions of a priest are not of this world, monsieur," said the *cure*, coldly.

M. de Sairmeuse was about to make some impertinent response, when M. Lacheneur appeared, followed by his daughter.

The wretched man was ghastly pale, great drops of perspiration stood out upon his temples, his restless, haggard eyes revealed his distress of mind.

Marie-Anne was as pale as her father, but her attitude and the light that burned in her eyes told of invincible energy and determination.

"Ah, well! friend," said the duke, "so we are the owner of Sairmeuse, it seems."

This was said with such a careless insolence of manner that the *cure* blushed that they should thus treat, in his own house, a man whom he considered his equal.

He rose and offered the visitors chairs.

"Will you take a seat, dear Monsieur Lacheneur?" said he, with a politeness intended as a lesson for the duke; "and you, also, mademoiselle, do me the honor ——"

But the father and the daughter both refused the proffered civility with a motion of the head.

"Monsieur le Duc," continued Lacheneur, "I am an old servant of your house ——"

"Ah! indeed!"

"Mademoiselle Armande, your aunt, accorded my poor mother the honor of acting as my godmother——"

"Ah, yes," interrupted the duke. "I remember you now. Our family has shown great goodness to you and yours. And it was to prove your gratitude, probably, that you made haste to purchase our estate!"

The former ploughboy was of humble origin, but his heart and his character had developed with his fortunes; he understood his own worth.

Much as he was disliked, and even detested, by his neighbors, every one respected him.

And here was a man who treated him with undisguised scorn. Why? By what right?

Indignant at the outrage, he made a movement as if to retire.

No one, save his daughter, knew the truth; he had only to keep silence and Sairmeuse remained his.

Yes, he had still the power to keep Sairmeuse, and he knew it, for he did not share the fears of the ignorant rustics. He was too well informed not to be able to distinguish between the hopes

of the *emigres* and the possible. He knew that an abyss separated the dream from the reality.

A beseeching word, uttered in a low tone by his daughter, made him turn again to the duke.

"If I purchased Sairmeuse," he answered, in a voice husky with emotion, "it was in obedience to the command of your dying aunt, and with the money which she gave me for that purpose. If you see me here, it is only because I come to restore to you the deposit confided to my keeping."

Any one not belonging to that class of spoiled fools which surround a throne would have been deeply touched.

But the duke thought this grand act of honesty and of generosity the most simple and natural thing in the world.

"That is very well, so far as the principal is concerned," said he. "Let us speak now of the interest. Sairmeuse, if I remember rightly, yielded an average income of one thousand louis per year. These revenues, well invested, should have amounted to a very considerable amount. Where is this?"

This claim, thus advanced and at such a moment, was so outrageous, that Martial, disgusted, made a sign to his father which the latter did not see.

But the *cure* hoping to recall the extortioner to something like a sense of shame, exclaimed:

"Monsieur le Duc! Oh, Monsieur le Duc!"

Lacheneur shrugged his shoulders with an air of resignation.

"The income I have used for my own living expenses, and in educating my children; but most of it has been expended in improving the estate, which today yields an income twice as large as in former years."

"That is to say, for twenty years, Monsieur Lacheneur has played the part of lord of the manor. A delightful comedy. You are rich now, I suppose."

"I possess nothing. But I hope you will allow me to take ten thousand francs, which your aunt gave to me."

"Ah! she gave you ten thousand francs? And when?"

"On the same evening that she gave me the eighty thousand francs intended for the purchase of the estate."

"Perfect! What proof can you furnish that she gave you this sum?"

Lacheneur stood motionless and speechless. He tried to reply, but he could not. If he opened his lips it would only be to pour forth a torrent of menaces, insults, and invectives.

Marie-Anne stepped quickly forward.

"The proof, monsieur," said she, in a clear, ringing voice, "is the word of this man, who, of his own free will, comes to return to you—to give you a fortune."

As she sprang forward, her beautiful dark hair escaped from its confinement, the rich blood crimsoned her cheeks, her dark eyes flashed brilliantly, and sorrow, anger, horror at the humiliation, imparted a sublime expression to her face.

She was so beautiful that Martial regarded her with wonder.

"Lovely!" he murmured, in English; "beautiful as an angel!"

These words, which she understood, abashed Marie-Anne. But she had said enough; her father felt that he was avenged.

He drew from his pocket a roll of papers, and throwing them upon the table:

"Here are your titles," he said, addressing the duke in a tone full of implacable hatred. "Keep the legacy that your aunt gave me, I wish nothing of yours. I shall never set foot in Sairmeuse again. Penniless I entered it, penniless I will leave it!"

He quitted the room with head proudly erect, and when they were outside, he said but one word to his daughter:

"Well!"

"You have done your duty," she replied; "it is those who have not done it, who are to be pitied!"

She had no opportunity to say more. Martial came running after them, anxious for another chance of seeing this young girl whose beauty had made such an impression upon him.

"I hastened after you," he said, addressing Marie Marie-Anne, rather than M. Lacheneur, "to reassure you. All this will be arranged, madamoiselle. Eyes so beautiful as yours should never know tears. I will be your advocate with my father——"

"Mlle. Lachoneur has no need of an advocate!" a harsh voice interrupted.

Martial turned, and saw the young man, who, that morning, went to warn M. Lacheneur of the duke's arrival.

"I am the Marquis de Sairmeuse," he said, insolently.

"And I," said the other quietly, "am Maurice d'Escorval."

They surveyed each other for a moment; each expecting, perhaps, an insult from the other. Instinctively, they felt that they were to be enemies; and the bitterest animosity spoke in the glances they exchanged. Perhaps they felt a presentiment that they were to be champions of two different principles, as well as rivals.

Martial, remembering his father, yielded.

"We shall meet again, Monsieur d'Escorval," he said, as he retired. At this threat, Maurice shrugged his shoulders, and said:

"You had better not desire it."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE abode of the Baron d'Escorval, that brick structure with stone trimmings which was visible from the superb avenue leading to Sairmeuse, was small and unpretentious.

Its chief attraction was a pretty lawn that extended to the banks of the Oiselle, and a small but beautifully shaded park.

It was known as the Chateau d'Escorval, but that appellation was gross flattery. Any petty manufacturer who had amassed a small fortune would have desired a larger, handsomer, and more imposing establishment.

M. d'Escorval—and it will be an eternal honor to him in history—was not rich.

Although he had been entrusted with several of those missions from which generals and diplomats often return laden with millions, M. d'Escorval's worldly possessions consisted only of the little patrimony bequeathed him by his father: a property which yielded an income of from twenty to twenty-five thousand francs a year.

This modest dwelling, situated about a mile from Sairmeuse, represented the savings of ten years.

He had built it in 1806, from a plan drawn by his own hand; and it was the dearest spot on earth to him.

He always hastened to this retreat when his work allowed him a few days of rest.

But this time, he had not come to Escorval of his own free will.

He had been compelled to leave Paris by the proscribed list of the 24th of July—that fatal list which summoned the enthusiastic Labedoyere and the honest and virtuous Drouot before a court-martial.

And even in this solitude, M. d'Escorval's situation was not without danger.

He was one of those who, some days before the disaster of Waterloo, had strongly urged the emperor to order the execution of Fouche, the former minister of police.

Now, Fouche knew this counsel; and he was powerful.

"Take care!" M. d'Escorval's friends wrote him from Paris.

But he put his trust in Providence, and faced the future, threatening though it was, with the unalterable serenity of a pure conscience.

The baron was still young; he was not yet fifty, but anxiety, work, and long nights passed in struggling with the most arduous difficulties of the imperial policy, had made him old before his time.

He was tall, slightly inclined to *embonpoint*, and stooped a little.

His calm eyes, his serious mouth, his broad, furrowed forehead, and his austere manners inspired respect.

"He must be stern and inflexible," said those who saw him for the first time.

But they were mistaken.

If, in the exercise of his official duties, this truly great man had the strength to resist all temptations to swerve from the path of right; if, when duty was at stake, he was as rigid as iron, in private life he was as unassuming as a child, and kind and gentle even to the verge of weakness.

To this nobility of character, he owed his domestic happiness, that rare and precious happiness which fills one's existence with a celestial perfume.

During the bloodiest epoch of the Reign of Terror, M. d'Escorval had wrested from the guillotine a young girl, named Victoire-Laure de 'Alleu, a distant cousin of the Rhetaus of Commarin, as beautiful as an angel, and only three years younger than himself.

He loved her—and though she was an orphan, destitute of fortune, he married her, considering the treasure of her virgin heart of far greater value than the most magnificent dowry.

She was an honest woman, as her husband was an honest man, in the most strict and vigorous sense of the word.

She was seldom seen at the Tuileries, where M. d'Escorval's worth made him eagerly welcomed. The splendors of the Imperial Court, which at that time surpassed all the pomp of the time of Louis XIV., had no attractions for her.

Grace, beauty, youth and accomplishments—she reserved them all for the adornment of her home.

Her husband was her God. She lived in him and through him. She had not a thought which did not belong to him.

The short time that he could spare from his arduous labors to devote to her were her happiest hours.

And when, in the evening, they sat beside the fire in their modest drawing-room, with their son Maurice playing on the rug at their feet, it seemed to them that they had nothing to wish for here below.

The overthrow of the empire surprised them in the heyday of their happiness.

Surprised them? No. For a long time M. d'Escorval had seen the prodigious edifice erected by the genius whom he had made his idol totter as if about to fall.

Certainly, he felt intense chagrin at this fall, but he was heart-broken at the sight of all the treason and cowardice which followed it. He was indignant and horrified at the rising *en masse* of the avaricious, who hastened to gorge themselves with the spoil.

Under these circumstances, exile from Paris seemed an actual blessing.

"Besides," as he remarked to the baroness, "we shall soon be forgotten here."

But even while he said this he felt many misgivings. Still, by his side, his noble wife presented a tranquil face, even while she trembled for the safety of her adored husband.

On this first Sunday in August, M. d'Escorval and his wife had been unusually sad. A vague presentment of approaching misfortune weighed heavily upon their hearts.

At the same hour that Lacheneur presented himself at the house of the Abbe Midon, they were seated upon the terrace in front of the house, gazing anxiously at the two roads leading from Escorval to the chateau, and to the village of Sairmeuse.

Warned, that same morning, by his friends in Montaignac of the arrival of the duke, the baron had sent his son to inform Mr. Lacheneur.

He had requested him to be absent as short a time as possible; but in spite of this fact, the hours were rolling by, and Maurice had not returned.

"What if something has happened to him!" both father and mother were thinking.

No; nothing had happened to him. Only a word from Mlle. Lacheneur had sufficed to make him forget his usual deference to his father's wishes.

"This evening," she had said, "I shall certainly know your heart."

What could this mean? Could she doubt him?

Tortured by the most cruel anxieties, the poor youth could not resolve to go away without an explanation, and he hung around the chateau hoping that Marie-Anne would reappear.

She did reappear at last, but leaning upon the arm of her father.

Young D'Escorval followed them at a distance, and soon saw them enter the parsonage. What were they going to do there? He knew that the duke and his son were within.

The time that they remained there, and which he passed in the public square, seemed more than a century long.

They emerged at last, however, and he was about to join them when he was prevented by the appearance of Martial, whose promises he overheard.

Maurice knew nothing of life; he was as innocent as a child, but he could not mistake the intentions that dictated this step on the part of the Marquis de Sairmeuse.

At the thought that a libertine's caprice should dare rest for an instant upon the pure and beautiful girl whom he loved with all the strength of his being—whom he had sworn should be his wife—all his blood mounted madly to his brain.

He felt a wild longing to chastise the insolent wretch.

Fortunately—unfortunately, perhaps—his hand was arrested by the recollection of a phrase which he had heard his father repeat a thousand times:

"Calmness and irony are the only weapons worthy of the strong."

And he possessed sufficient strength of will to appear calm, while, in reality, he was beside himself with passion. It was Martial who lost his self-control, and who threatened him.

"Ah! yes, I will find you again, upstart!" repeated Maurice, through his set teeth as he watched his enemy move away.

For Martial had turned and discovered that Marie-Anne and her father had left him. He saw them standing about a hundred paces from him. Although he was surprised at their indifference, he made haste to join them, and addressed M. Lacheneur.

"We are just going to your father's house," was the response he received, in an almost ferocious tone.

A glance from Marie-Anne commanded silence. He obeyed, and walked a few steps behind them, with his head bowed upon his breast, terribly anxious, and seeking vainly to explain what had passed.

His attitude betrayed such intense sorrow that his mother divined it as soon as she caught sight of him.

All the anguish which this courageous woman had hidden for a month, found utterance in a single cry.

"Ah! here is misfortune!" said she: "we shall not escape it."

It was, indeed misfortune. One could not doubt it when one saw M. Lacheneur enter the drawing-room.

He advanced with the heavy, uncertain step of a drunken man, his eye void of expression, his features distorted, his lips pale and trembling.

"What has happened?" asked the baron, eagerly.

But the other did not seem to hear him.

"Ah! I warned her," he murmured, continuing a monologue which had begun before he entered the room. I told my daughter so."

Mme. d'Escorval, after kissing Marie-Anne, drew the girl towards her.

"What has happened? For God's sake, tell me what has happened!" she exclaimed.

With a gesture expressive of the most sorrowful resignation, the girl motioned her to look and to listen to M. Lacheneur.

He had recovered from that stupor—that gift of God—which follows cries that are too terrible for human endurance. Like a sleeper who, on waking, finds his miseries forgotten during his slumber, lying in wait for him, he regained with consciousness the capacity to suffer.

"It is only this, Monsieur le Baron," replied the unfortunate man in a harsh, unnatural voice: "I rose this morning the richest proprietor in the country, and I shall lay down to-night poorer than the poorest beggar in this commune. I had everything; I no longer have anything—nothing but my two hands. They earned me my bread for twenty-five years; they will earn it for me now until the day of my death. I had a beautiful dream; it is ended."

Before this outburst of despair, M. d'Escorval turned pale.

"You must exaggerate your misfortune," he faltered; "explain what has happened."

Unconscious of what he was doing, M. Lacheneur threw his hat upon a chair, and flinging back his long, gray hair, he said:

"To you I will tell all. I came here for that purpose. I know you: I know your heart. And have you not done me the honor to call me your friend?"

Then, with the cruel exactness of the living, breathing truth, he related the scene which had just taken place at the presbytery.

The baron listened petrified with astonishment, almost doubting the evidence of his own senses. Mme. d'Escorval's indignant and sorrowful exclamations showed that every noble sentiment in her soul revolted against such injustice.

But there was one auditor, whom Marie-Anne alone observed, who was moved to his very entrails by this recital. This auditor was Maurice.

Leaning against the door, pale as death, he tried most energetically, but in vain, to repress the tears of rage and of sorrow which swelled up in his eyes.

To insult Lacheneur was to insult Marie-Anne—that is to say, to injure, to strike, to outrage him in all that he held most dear in the world.

Ah! it is certain that Martial, had he been within his reach would have paid dearly for these insults to the father of the girl Maurice loved.

But he swore that this chastisement was only deferred—that it should surely come.

And it was not mere angry boasting. This young man, though so modest and so gentle in manner, had a heart that was inaccessible to fear. His beautiful, dark eyes, which had the trembling timidity of the eyes of a young girl, met the gaze of an enemy without flinching.

When M. Lacheneur had repeated the last words which he had addressed to the Duke de Sairmeuse, M. d'Escorval offered him his hand.

"I have told you already that I was your friend," he said, in a voice faltering with emotion; "but I must tell you to-day that I am proud of having such a friend as you."

The unfortunate man trembled at the touch of that loyal hand which clasped his so warmly, and his face betrayed an ineffable satisfaction.

"If my father had not returned it," murmured the obstinate Marie-Anne. "my father would have been an unfaithful guardian—a thief. He has done only his duty."

M. d'Escorval turned to the young girl, a little surprised.

"You speak the truth, mademoiselle," he said, reproachfully; "but when you are as old as I am, and have had my experience, you will know that the accomplishment of a duty is, under certain circumstances, a heroism of which few persons are capable."

M. Lacheneur turned to his friend.

"Ah! your words do me good, monsieur," said he. "Now, I am content with what I have done."

The baroness rose, too much the woman to know how to resist the generous dictates of her heart.

"And I, also, Monsieur Lacheneur," she said, "desire to press your hand. I wish to tell you that I esteem you as much as I despise the ingrates who have sought to humiliate you, when they should have fallen at your feet. They are heartless monsters, the like of whom certainly cannot be found upon the earth."

"Alas!" sighed the baron, "the allies have brought back others who, like these men, think the world created exclusively for their benefit."

"And these people wish to be our masters," growled Lacheneur.

By some strange fatality no one chanced to hear the remark, made by M. Lacheneur. Had they overheard and questioned him, he would probably have disclosed some of the projects which were as yet in embryo in his own mind; and in that case what disastrous consequences might have been averted.

M. d'Escorval had regained his usual coolness.

"Now, my dear friend," he inquired, "what course do you propose to pursue with these members of the Sairmeuse family?"

"They will hear nothing more from me—for some time, at least."

"What! Shall you not claim the ten thousand francs that they owe you?"

"I shall ask them for nothing."

"You will be compelled to do so. Since you have alluded to the legacy, your own honor will demand that you insist upon its payment by all legal methods. There are still judges in Franc."

M. Lacheneur shook his head.

"The judges will not accord me the

justice I desire. I shall not apply to them."

"But——"

"No, monsieur, no. I wish to have nothing to do with these men. I shall not even go to the chateau to remove my clothing nor that of my daughter. If they send it to us—very well. If it pleases them to keep it so much the better. The more shameful, infamous and odious their conduct appears, the better I shall be satisfied."

The baron made no reply; but his wife spoke. believing she had a sure means of conqering this incomprehensible obstinacy.

"I should understand your determination if you were alone in the world," said she, "but you have children."

"My son is eighteen, madame; he possesses good health and an excellent education. He can make his own way in Paris, if he chooses to remain there."

"But your daughter?"

"Marie-Anne will remain with me."

M. d'Escorval thought it his duty to interfere.

"Take care, my dear friend, that your grief does not overthrow your reason," said he. "Reflect? What will become of you—your daughter and yourself?"

The wretched man smiled sadly.

"Oh," he replied, "we are not as destitute as I said. I exaggerated our misfortune. We are still landed proprietors. Last year an old cousin, whom I could never induce to come and live at Sairmeuse, died, bequeathing all her property to Marie-Anne. This property consisted of a poor little cottage near the Reche, with a little garden and a few acres of sterile land. In compliance with my daughter's entreaties, I repaired the cottage, and sent there a few articles of furniture—a table, some chairs, and a couple of beds. My daughter designed it as a home for old Father Guvat and his wife. And I, surrounded by wealth and luxury, said to myself: 'How comfortable those two old people will be there. They will live as snug as a bug in a rug!' Well, what I thought so comfortable for others, will be good enough for me. I will raise vegetables, and Marie-Anne shall sell them.

Was he speaking seriously?

Maurice must have supposed so, for he sprang forward.

"This shall not be, Monsieur Lacheneur!" he exclaimed.

"Oh——"

"No, this shall not be, for I love Marie-Anne, and I ask you to give her to me for my wife."

CHAPTER XLIX.

MAURICE and Marie-Anne had loved each other for many years.

As children, they had played together in the magnificent grounds surrounding the Chateau de Sairmeuse, and in the park at Escorval.

Together they chased the brilliant butterflies, searched for pebbles on the banks of the river, or rolled in the hay while their mothers sauntered through the meadows bordering the Oiselle.

For their mothers were friends.

Mme. Lacheneur had been reared like other poor peasant girls; that is too say, on the day of her marriage it was only with great difficulty she succeeded in inscribing her name upon the register.

But from the example of her husband she had learned that prosperity, as well as *noblesse*, entails certain obligations upon one, and with rare courage, crowned with still rarer success, she had undertaken to acquire an education in keeping with her fortune and her new rank.

And the baroness had made no effort to resist the sympathy that attracted her to this meritorious young woman, in whom she had discerned a really superior mind and a truly refined nature.

When Mme. Lacheneur died, Mme. d'Escorval mourned for her as she would have mourned for a favorite sister.

From that moment Maurice's attachment assumed a more serious character.

Educated in a Parisian lyceum, his teachers sometimes had occasion to complain of his want of application.

"If your professors are not satisfied with you," said his mother, "you shall not accompany me to Escorval on the coming of your vacation, and you will not see your little friend."

And this simple threat was always sufficient to make the school-boy resume his studies with redoubled diligence.

So each year, as it passed, strengthened the *grande passion* which preserved Maurice from the restlessness and the errors of adolescence.

The two children were equally timid and artless, and equally infatuated with each other.

Long walks in the twilight under the eyes of their parents, a glance that revealed their delight at meeting each other, flowers exchanged between them —which were religiously preserved—such were their simple pleasures.

But that magical and sublime word: love—so sweet to utter, and so sweet to hear—had never once dropped from their lips.

The audacity of Maurice had never gone beyond a furtive pressure of the hand.

The parents could not be ignorant of this mutual affection; and if they pre-

tended to shut their eyes, it was only because it did not displease them nor disturb their plans.

M. and Mme. d'Escorval saw no objection to their son's marriage with a young girl whose nobility of character they appreciated, and who was as beautiful as she was good. That she was the richest heiress in all the country round about was naturally no objection.

So far as M. Lacheneur was concerned, he was delighted at the prospect of a marriage which would ally him, a former ploughboy, with an old family whose head was universally respected.

So, although no direct allusion to the subject had ever escaped the lips of the baron or of M. Lacheneur, there was a tacit agreement between the two families.

Yes, the marriage was considered a foregone conclusion.

And yet this impetuous and unexpected declaration by Maurice struck every one dumb.

In spite of his agitation, the young man perceived the effect produced by his words, and frightened by his own boldness, he turned and looked questioningly at his father.

The baron's face was grave, even sad; but his attitude expressed no displeasure.

This gave renewed courage to the anxious lover.

"You will excuse me, monsieur," he said, addressing Lacheneur, "for presenting my request in such a manner, and at such a time. But surely, when fate glowers ominously upon you, that is the time when your friends should declare themselves—and deem themselves fortunate if their devotion can make you forget the infamous treatment to which you have been subjected."

As he spoke, he was watching Marie-Anne.

Blushing and embarrassed, she turned away her head, perhaps to conceal the tears which inundated her face—tears of joy and of gratitude.

The love of the man she adored came forth victorious from a test which it would not be prudent for many heiresses to impose.

Now she could truly say that she knew Maurice's heart.

He, however, continued:

"I have not consulted my father, sir; but I know his affection for me and his esteem for you. When the happiness of my life is at stake, he will not oppose me. He, who married my dear mother without a dowry, must understand my feelings."

He was silent, awaiting the verdict.

"I approve your course, my son," said M. d'Escorval, deeply affected; "you have conducted yourself like an honorable man. Certainly you are very young to become the head of a family; but, as you say, circumstances demand it."

He turned to M. Lacheneur, and added:

"My dear friend, I, in my son's behalf, ask the hand of your daughter in marriage."

Maurice had not expected so little opposition.

In his delight he was almost tempted to bless the hateful Duke de Sairmeuse, to whom he would owe his approaching happiness.

He sprang towards his father, and seizing his hands, he raised them to his lips, faltering:

"Thanks!—you are so good! I love you! Oh, how happy I am!"

Alas! the poor boy was in too much haste to rejoice.

A gleam of pride flashed in M. Lacheneur's eyes; but his face soon resumed its gloomy expression.

"Believe me, Monsieur le Baron, I am deeply touched by your grandeur of soul—yes, deeply touched. You wish to make me forget my humiliation; but, for this very reason, I should be the most contemptible of men if I did not refuse the great honor you desire to confer upon my daughter."

"What!" exclaimed the baron, in utter astonishment; "you refuse?"

"I am compelled to do so."

Thunderstruck at first, Maurice afterwards renewed the attack with an energy which no one had ever suspected in his character before.

"Do you, then, wish to ruin my life, monsieur?" he exclaimed—"to ruin *our* life; for if I love Marie-Anne, she also loves me."

It was easy to see that he spoke the truth. The unhappy girl, crimson with happy blushes the moment before, had suddenly become whiter than marble as she looked imploringly at her father.

"It cannot be," repeated M. Lacheneur; "and the day will come when you will bless the decision I make known at this moment."

Alarmed by her son's evident agony, Mme. d'Escorval interposed:

"You must have reasons for this refusal."

"None that I can disclose, madame. But never while I live shall my daughter be your son's wife?"

"Ah! it will kill my child!" exclaimed the baroness.

M. Lacheneur shook his head.

"M. Maurice," said he, "is young; he will console himself—he will forget."

"Never!" interrupted the unhappy lover—"never!"

"And your daughter?" inquired the baroness.

Ah! this was the weak spot in his armor; the instinct of a mother was not mistaken. M. Lacheneur hesitated a mo-

ment; but he finally conquered the weakness that had threatened to master him.

"Marie-Anne," he replied, slowly, "knows her duty too well not to obey when I command. When I tell her the motive that governs my conduct, she will become resigned: and if she suffers, she will know how to conceal her sufferings."

He paused suddenly. They heard in the distance a firing of musketry, the discharge of rifles, whose sharp ring overpowered even the sullen roar of cannon.

Every face grew pale. Circumstances imparted to these sounds an ominous significance.

With the same anguish clutching the hearts of both, M. d'Escorval and Lacheneur sprang out upon the terrace.

But all was still again. Extended as was the horizon, the eye could discern nothing unusual. The sky was blue; not a particle of smoke hung over the trees.

"It is the enemy," muttered M. Lacheneur, in a tone which told how gladly he would have shouldered his gun and with five hundred others, marched against the united allies.

He paused. The explosions were repeated with still greater violence, and for a period of five minutes succeeded each other without cessation.

M. d'Escorval listened with knitted brows.

"That is not the fire of an engagement," he murmured.

To remain long in such a state of uncertainty was out of the question.

"If you will permit me, father," ventured Maurice, "I will go and ascertain——"

"Go," replied the baron quietly; but if it is anything, which I doubt, do not expose yourself to danger, return."

"Oh! be prudent!" insisted Mme. d'Escorval, who already saw her son exposed to the most frightful peril.

"Be prudent!" entreated Marie-Anne, who alone understood what attractions danger might have for a despairing and unhappy man.

These cautions were unnecessary. As Maurice was rushing to the door, his father stopped him.

"Wait," said he: "here is some one who can probably give us information."

A man had just appeared around a turn of the road leading to Sairmeuse.

He was advancing bare-headed in the middle of the dusty road, with hurried strides, and occasionally brandishing his stick, as if threatening an enemy visible to himself alone.

Soon they were able to distinguish his features.

"It is Chanlouineau!" exclaimed M. Lacheneur.

"The owner of the vineyards on the Borderie?"

"The same! The handsomest young farmer in the country, and the best also. Ah! he has good blood in his veins; we may well be proud of him."

"Ask him to stop," said M. d'Escorval.

Lacheneur leaned over the balustrade and forming a trumpet out of his two hands, he called:

"Oh!—Chanlouineau!"

The robust young farmer raised his head.

"Come up," shouted Lacheneur; "the baron wishes to speak with you."

Chanlouineau responded by a gesture of assent. They saw him enter the gate, cross the garden, and at last appear at the door of the drawing-room.

His features were distorted with fury, his disordered clothing gave evidence of a serious conflict. His cravat was gone, and torn shirt-collar revealed his muscular throat.

"Where is this fighting?" demanded Lacheneur eagerly; "and with whom?"

Chanlouineau gave a nervous laugh which resembled a roar of rage.

"They are not fighting," he replied; they are amusing themselves. This firing which you hear is in honor of M. le Duc de Sairmeuse."

"Impossible!"

"I know it very well—and yet, what I have told you is the truth. It is the work of that miserable wretch and thief, Chupin. Ah, *canaille*! If I ever find him within reach of my arm he will never steal again."

M. Lacheneur was confounded.

"Tell us what has happened," he said, excitedly.

"Oh, it is as clear as daylight. When the duke arrived at Sairmeuse, Chupin, the old scoundrel, with his two rascally boys, and that old hag, his wife, ran after the carriage like beggars after a diligence, crying, 'Vive Monsieur le Duc!' The duke was enchanted, for he doubtless expected a volley of stones, and he placed a six franc piece in the hand of each of the wretches. This money gave Chupin an appetite for more, so he took it into his head to give this old noble a reception like that which was given to the Emperor. Having learned through Bibiaine, whose tongue is as long as a viper's, all that had passed at the presbytery, between you, Monsieur Lacheneur, and the duke, he came and proclaimed it in the market-place. When they heard it, all who had purchased national lands were frightened. Chupin had counted on this, and soon he began telling the poor fools that they must burn powder under the duke's nose if they wished him to confirm their titles to their property."

"And did they believe him?"

"Implicitly. It did not take them long to make their preparations. They went to the town hall and took the firemen's rifles, and the guns used for firing a sa-

lute on *fete* days; the mayor gave them the powder, and you heard——"

"When I left Sairmeuse there was more than two hundred idiots before the presbytery, shouting;

"*Vive Monseigneur! Vive le Duc de Sairmeuse!*"

It was as D'Escorval had thought.

"The same pitiful farce that was played in Paris, only on a smaller scale," he murmured. "Avarice and human cowardice are the same the world over!"

Meanwhile, Chanlouineau was going on with his recital.

"To make the *fete* complete, the devil must have warned all the nobility in the neighborhood, for they all came running. They say that M. de Sairmeuse is a favorite with the king, and that he can get anything he wishes. So you can imagine how they all greeted him! I am only a poor peasant, but never would I lie down in the dust before any man as these old nobles who are so haughty with us, did before the duke. They kissed his hands, and he allowed them to do it. He walked about the square with the Marquis de Courtornieu——"

"And his son?" interrupted Maurice.

"The Marquis Martial, is it not? He is also walking before the church with Mlle. Blanche de Courtornieu upon his arm. Ah! I do not understand how people can call her pretty—a little bit of a thing, so blonde that one might suppose her hair was gray. Ah! how those two laughed and made fun of the peasants. They say they are going to marry each other. And even this evening there is to be a banquet at the Chateau de Courtornieu in honor of the duke."

He had told all he knew. He paused.

"You have forgotten only one thing," said M. Lacheneur; "that is, to tell us how your clothing happened to be torn, as if you had been fighting."

The young farmer hesitated for a moment, then replied, somewhat brusquely:

"I can tell you, all the same. While Chupin was preaching, I also preached, but not in the same strain. The scoundrel reported me. So, in crossing the square, the duke paused before me and remarked: 'So you are an evil disposed person?' I said no, but that I knew my rights. Then he took me by the coat and shook me, and told me that he would cure me, and that he would take possession of *his* vineyard again. *Saint Dieu!* When I felt the old rascal's hand upon me my blood boiled. I pinioned him. Fortunately six or seven men fell upon me, and compelled me to let him go. But he had better make up his mind not to come prowling around my vineyard!"

He clenched his hands, his eyes blazed ominously, his whole person breathed an intense desire for vengeance.

And M. d' Escorval was silent, fearing to aggravate this hatred, so imprudently kindled, and whose explosion, he believed, would be terrible.

M. Lacheneur had risen from his chair.

"I must go and take possession of my cottage," he remarked to Chanlouineau; "you will accompany me; I have a proposition to make to you."

M. and Mme. d'Escorval endeavored to detain him, but he would not allow himself to be persuaded, and he departed with his daughter.

But Maurice did not despair; Marie-Anne had promised to meet him the following day in the pine grove near the *Reche*.

CHAPTER L.

THE demonstrations which had greeted the Duke de Sairmeuse had been correctly reported by Chanlouineau.

Chupin had found the secret of kindling to a white heat the enthusiasm of the cold and calculating peasants who were his neighbors.

He was a dangerous rascal, the old robber, shrewd and cautious; bold, as those who possess nothing can afford to be; as patient as a savage; in short, one of the most consummate scoundrels that ever existed.

The peasants feared him, and yet they had no conception of his real character.

All his resources of mind had, until now, been expended in evading the precipice of the rural code.

To save himself from falling into the hands of the *gendarmes*, and to steal a few sacks of wheat, he had expended treasures of intrigue which would have made the fortunes of twenty diplomates.

Circumstances, as he always said, had been against him.

So he desperately caught at the first and only opportunity worthy of his talent, which had ever presented itself.

Of course, the wily rustic had said nothing of the true circumstances which attended the restoration of Sairmeuse to its former owner.

From him, the peasants learned only the bare fact; and the news spread rapidly from group to group.

"M. Lacheneur has given up Sairmeuse," said he. "Chateau, forests, vineyards, fields—he surrenders everything."

This was enough, and more than enough to terrify every land-owner in the village.

If Lacheneur, this man who was so powerful in their eyes, considered the danger so threatening that he deemed it necessary or advisable to make a complete surrender, what was to become of

them—poor devils—without aid, without counsel, without defense?

They were told that the government was about to betray their interests; that a decree was in process of preparation which would render their title-deeds worthless. They could see no hope of salvation, except through the duke's generosity—that generosity which Chupin painted with the glowing colors of the rainbow.

When one is not strong enough to weather the gale, one must bow like the reed before it and rise again after the storm has passed; such was their conclusion.

And they bowed. And their apparent enthusiasm was all the more vociferous on account of the rage and fear that filled their hearts.

A close observer would have detected an under-current of anger and menace in their shouts.

Each man also said to himself:

"What do we risk by crying, "Vive le duc?" Nothing, absolutely nothing. If he is contented with that as a compensation for his lost property—good! If he is not content, we shall have time afterward to adopt other measures."

So they shouted themselves hoarse.

And while the duke was sipping his coffee in the little drawing-room of the presbytery, he expressed his lively satisfaction at the scene without.

He, this *grand seigneur* of times gone by; this man of absurd prejudices and obstinate illusions; the unconquerable, and the incorrigible—he took these acclamations, "truly spurious coin," as Chateaubriand says, for ready money.

"How you have deceived me, sure," he was saying to Abbe Midon; "How could you declare that your people were unfavorably disposed toward us? One is compelled to believe that these evil intentions exist only in your own mind and in your own heart."

Abbe Midon was silent. What could he reply?

He could not understand this sudden revolution in public opinion—this abrupt change from gloom and discontent to excessive gayety.

There is somebody at the bottom of all this, he thought.

It was not long before it became apparent who that somebody was.

Emboldened by his success without, Chupin ventured to present himself at the presbytery.

He entered the drawing-room with his back rounded into a circle, scraping and cringing, an obsequious smile upon his lips.

And through the half-open door one could discern, in the shadows of the passage, the far from reassuring faces of his two sons.

He came as an ambassador, he declared, after an interminable litany of protestations—he came to implore "monseigneur" to show himself upon the public square.

"Ah, well—yes," exclaimed the duke, rising; "yes, I will yield to the wishes of these good people. Follow me, marquis!"

As he appeared at the door of the presbytery, a loud shout rent the air; the rifles were discharged, the guns belched forth their smoke and fire. Never had Sairmeuse heard such a salvo of artillery. Three windows in the Bœf Couronne were shattered.

A veritable *grand seigneur*, the Duke de Sairmeuse knew how to preserve an appearance of haughtiness and indifference. Any display of emotion was, in his opinion, vulgar; but, in reality, he was delighted, charmed.

So delighted that he desired to reward his welcomers.

A glance over the deeds handed him by Lacheneur, had shown him that Sairmeuse had been restored to him intact.

The portions of the immense domain which had been detached and sold separately, were of relatively minor importance.

The duke thought it would be politic, and, at the same time, inexpensive, to abandon all claim to these few acres, which were now shared by forty or fifty peasants.

"My friends," he exclaimed, in a loud voice, "I renounce, for myself and for my descendants, all claim to the lands belonging to my house which you have purchased. They are yours—I give them to you!"

By this absurd pretense of a gift, M. de Sairmeuse thought to add the finishing touch to his popularity. A great mistake! It simply assured the popularity of Chupin, the organizer of the farce.

And while the duke was promenading through the crowd with a proud and self-satisfied air, the peasants were secretly laughing and jeering at him.

And if they promptly took sides with him against Chanlouineau, it was only because his gift was still fresh in their minds; except for this——

But the duke had not time to think much about this encounter, which produced a vivid impression upon his son.

One of his former companions in exile, the Marquis de Courtornieu, whom he had informed of his arrival, hastened to welcome him, accompanied by his daughter, Mademoiselle Blanche.

Martial could do no less than offer his arm to the daughter of his father's friend; and they took a leisurely promenade in the shade of the lofty trees, while the duke renewed his acquaintance with all the nobility of the neighborhood.

There was not a single nobleman who did not hasten to press the hand of the Duke de Sairmeuse. First, he possessed, it was said, a property of more than twenty millions in England. Then, he was the friend of the king, and each neighbor had some favor to ask for himself, for his relatives, or for his friends.

Poor king! He should have had entire France to divide like a cake between these cormorants, whose voracious appetites it was impossible to satisfy.

That evening, after a grand banquet at the Chateau de Courtornieu, the duke slept in the Chateau de Sairmeuse, in the room which had been occupied by Lacheneur, "like Louis XVIII," he laughingly said, "in the chamber of Bonaparte."

He was gay, chatty, and full of confidence in the future.

"Ah! it is good to be in one's own house!" he remarked to his son again and again.

But Martial responded only mechanically. His mind was occupied with thoughts of two women who had made a profound impression upon his by no means susceptible heart that day. He was thinking of those two young girls, so utterly unlike.

Blanche de Courtornieu—Marie-Anne Lacheneur.

CHAPTER LI.

ONLY those who, in the bright springtime of life, have loved, have been loved in return, and have suddenly seen an impassable gulf open between them and happiness, can realize Maurice d'Escorval's disappointment.

All the dreams of his life, all his future plans, were based upon his love for Marie-Anne.

If this love failed him, the enchanted castle which hope had erected, would crumble and fall, burying him in the ruins.

Without Marie-Anne he saw neither aim nor motive in his existence. Still he did not suffer himself to be deluded by false hopes. Although at first, his appointed meeting with Marie-Anne on the following day seemed salvation itself, on reflection, he was forced to admit that this interview would change nothing, since everything depended upon the will of another party—the will of M. Lacheneur.

The remainder of the day he passed in mournful silence. The dinner hour came; he took his seat at the table, but it was impossible for him to swallow a morsel, and he soon requested his parents' permission to withdraw.

M. d'Escorval and the baroness exchanged a sorrowful glance, but did not allow themselves to offer any comment. They respected his grief. They knew that his was one of those sorrows which are only aggravated by any attempt at consolation.

"Poor Maurice!" murmured Madame d'Escorval, as soon as her son had left the room. And, as her husband made no reply: "Perhaps," she added, hesitatingly, "perhaps it will not be prudent for us to leave him too entirely to the dictates of his despair."

The baron shuddered. He divined only too well the terrible apprehensions of his wife.

"We have nothing to fear," he replied, quickly; "I heard Marie-Anne promise to meet Maurice to-morrow in the grove on the Reche."

The anxious mother breathed more freely. Her blood had frozen with horror at the thought that her son might, perhaps, be contemplating suicide; but she was a mother, and her husband's assurances did not satisfy her.

She hastily ascended the stairs leading to her son's room, softly opened the door, and looked in. He was so engrossed in his gloomy reverie that he had heard nothing, and did not even suspect the presence of the anxious mother who was watching over him.

He was sitting at the window, his elbows resting upon the sill, his head supported by his hands, looking out into the night.

There was no moon, but the night was clear, and over beyond the light fog that indicated the course of the Oiselle, one could discern the imposing mass of the Chateau de Sairmeuse, with its towers and fanciful turrets.

More than once he had sat thus silently gazing at this chateau, which sheltered what was dearest and most precious in all the world to him.

From his windows he could see those of the room occupied by Marie-Anne; and his heart always quickened its throbbing when he saw them illuminated.

"She is there," he thought, "in her virgin chamber. She is kneeling to say her prayers. She murmurs my name after that of her father, imploring God's blessing upon us both."

But this evening he was not waiting for a light to gleam through the panes of that dear window.

Marie-Anne was no longer at Sairmeuse—she had been driven away.

Where was she now? She, accustomed to all the luxury that wealth could procure, no longer had any home except a poor thatch covered hovel, whose walls were not even whitewashed, whose only floor was the earth itself, dusty as the public highway in summer, frozen or muddy in winter.

She was reduced to the necessity of occupying herself the humble abode, she,

in her charitable heart, had intended as an asylum for one of her pensioners.

What was she doing now? Doubtless she was weeping.

At this thought, poor Maurice was heart-broken.

What was his surprise, a little after midnight, to see the chateau brilliantly illuminated.

The duke and his son had repaired to the chateau after the banquet given by the Marquis de Courtornieu was over; and before going to bed, they made a tour of inspection through this magnificent abode in which their ancestors had lived. They, therefore, might be said to have taken possession of the mansion whose threshold M. de Sairmeuse had not crossed for twenty-two years, and which Martial had never seen.

Maurice saw the lights leap from story to story, from casement to casement, until at last even the windows of Marie-Anne's room were illuminated.

At this sight, the unhappy youth could not restrain a cry of rage.

These men, these strangers, dared enter this virgin bower which he, even in thought, scarcely dared to penetrate.

They trampled carelessly over the delicate carpet with their heavy boots. Maurice trembled in thinking of the liberties which they, in their insolent familiarity, might venture upon. He fancied he could see them examining and handling the thousand petty trifles with which young girls love to surround themselves, they opened the presses, perhaps they were reading an unfinished letter lying upon her writing desk.

Never until this evening had Martial supposed he could hate another as he hated these men.

At last, in despair, he threw himself upon his bed, and passed the remainder of the night in thinking over what he should say to Marie-Anne on the morrow, and in seeking some issue from this inextricable labyrinth.

He rose before daybreak and wandered about the park like a soul in distress, fearing, yet longing for the hour that would decide his fate. Mme. d'Escorval was obliged to exert all her authority to make him take some nourishment. He had quite forgotten that he had passed twenty-four hours without eating.

When eleven o'clock sounded he left the house.

The lands of the Reche are situated on the other side of the Oiselle. Maurice, to reach his destination, was obliged to cross the river at a ferry only a short distance from his home. When he reached the river-bank he found six or seven peasants who were waiting to cross.

These people did not observe Maurice. They were talking earnestly, and he listened.

"It is certainly true," said one of the men. "I heard it from Chanlouineau himself only last evening. He was wild with delight. 'I invite you all to the wedding!' he cried. 'I am betrothed to M. Lacheneur's daughter; the affair is decided.' "

This astounding news positively stunned Maurice. He was actually unable to think or to move.

" 'Besides, he has been in love with her for a long time. Every one knows that. One had only to see his eyes when he met her—coals of fire were nothing to them. But while her father was so rich, he did not dare to speak. Now that the old man has met with these reverses, he ventures to offer himself, and is accepted."

"An unfortunate thing for him," remarked a little old man.

"Why so?"

"If M. Lacheneur is ruined, as they say——"

The others laughed heartily.

"Ruined — M. Lacheneur!" they exclaimed in chorus. "How absurd! He is richer than all of us together. Do you suppose that he has been stupid enough not to have laid anything aside during all these years? He has put this money not in grounds, as he pretends, but somewhere else."

"You are saying what is untrue!" interrupted Maurice, indignantly. "M. Lacheneur left Sairmeuse as poor as he entered it."

On recognizing M. d'Escorval's son, the peasants became extremely cautious. He questioned them, but could obtain only vague and unsatisfactory answers. A peasant, when interrogated, will never give a response which he thinks will be displeasing to his questioner; he is afraid of compromising himself.

The news he had heard, however, caused Maurice to hasten on still more rapidly after crossing the Oiselle.

"Marie-Anne marry Chanlouineau!" he repeated; "it is impossible! it is impossible!"

CHAPTER LII.

THE Reche, literally translated the "Waste," where Marie-Anne had promised to meet Maurice, owed its name to the rebellious and sterile character of the soil.

Nature seemed to have laid her curse upon it. Nothing would grow there. The ground was covered with stones, and the sandy soil defied all attempts to enrich it.

A few stunted oaks rose here and there above the thorns and broom-plant.

But on the lowlands of the Reche is a

flourishing grove. The firs are straight and strong, for the floods of winter have deposited in some of the clifts of the rock sufficient soil to sustain them and the wild clematis and honeysuckle that cling to their branches.

On reaching this grove, Maurice consulted his watch. It marked the hour of mid-day. He had supposed that he was late, but he was more than an hour in advance of the appointed time.

He seated himself upon a high rock, from which he could survey the entire Reche, and waited.

The day was magnificent; the air intensely hot. The rays of the August sun fell with scorching violence upon the sandy soil, and withered the few plants which had sprung up since the last rain.

The stillness was profound, almost terrible. Not a sound broke the s lence, not even the buzzing of an insect, nor a whisper of breeze in the trees. All nature seemed sleeping. And on no side was there anything to remind one of life, motion, or mankind.

This repose of nature, which contrasted so vividly with the tumult raging in his own heart, exerted a beneficial effect upon Maurice. These few moments of solitude afforded him an opportunity to regain his composure, to collect his thoughts scattered by the storm of passion which had swept over his soul, as leaves are scattered by the fierce November gale.

With sorrow comes experience, and that cruel knowledge of life which teaches one to guard one's self against one's hopes.

It was not until he heard the conversation of these peasants that Maurice fully realized the horror of Lacheneur's position. Suddenly precipitated from the social eminence which he had attained, he found, in the valley of humiliations into which he was cast, only hatred, distrust, and scorn. Both factions despised and denied him. Traitor, cried one; thief, cried the another. He no longer held any social status. He was the fallen man, the man who *had* been, and who was no more.

Was not the excessive misery of such a position a sufficent explanation of the strangest and wildest resolutions?

This thought made Maurice tremble. Connecting the stories of the peasants with the words addressed to Chanlouineau at Escorval, by M. Lacheneur, on the preceding evening, he arrived at the conclusion that this report of Marie-Anne's approaching marriage to the young farmer was not so improbable as he had at first supposed.

But why should M. Lacheneur give his daughter to an uncultured peasant? From mercenary motives? Certainly not, since he had just refused an alliance of which he had been proud in his days of prosperity. Could it be in order to satisfy his wounded pride, then? Perhaps he did not wish it to be said that he owed anything to a son-in-law.

Maurice was exhausting all his ingenuity and penetration in endeavoring to solve this mystery, when at last, on a foot-path which crosses the waste, a woman appeared—Marie-Anne.

He rose, but fearing observation, did not venture to leave the shelter of the grove.

Marie-Anne must have felt a similar fear, for she hurried on, casting anxious glances on every side as she ran. Maurice remarked, not without surprise, that she was bare-headed, and that she had neither shawl nor scarf about her shoulders.

As she reached the edge of the wood, he sprang towards her, and catching her hand raised it to his lips.

But this hand which she had so often yielded to him, was now gently withdrawn with so sad a gesture that he could not help feeling there was no hope.

"I came, Maurice," she began, "because I could not endure the thought of your anxiety. By doing so I have betrayed my father's confidence—he was obliged to leave home. I hastened here. And yet I promised him, only two hours ago, that I would never see you again. You hear me—never!"

She spoke hurriedly, but Maurice was appalled by the firmness of her accent.

Had he been less agitated, he would have seen what a terrible effort this semblance of calmness cost the young girl. He would have understood it from her pallor, from the contraction of her lips, from the redness of the eyelids which she had vainly bathed with fresh water, and which betrayed the tears that had fallen during the night.

"If I have come," she cont'nued, "it is only to tell you that, for your own sake, as well as for mine, there must not remain in the secret recesses of your heart, even the slightest shadow of a hope. All is over; we are separated forever! Only weak natures revolt against a destiny which they cannot alter. Let us accept our fate uncomplainingly. I wished to see you once more, and to say this: Have courage, Maurice. Go away—leave Escorval—forget me!"

"Forget you, Marie-Anne!" exclaimed the wretched young man, "forget you!"

His eyes met hers, and in a husky voice he added:

"Will you then forget me?"

"I am a woman, Maurice——"

But he interrupted her:

"Ah! I did not expect this," he said, despondently. "Poor fool that I was! I believed that you would find a way to touch your father's heart.

She blushed slightly, hesitated, and said:

"I have thrown myself at my father's feet; he repulsed me."

Maurice was thunderstruck, but recovering himself:

"It was because you did not know how to speak to him!" he exclaimed in a passion of fury; "but I shall know—I will present such arguments that he will be forced to yield. What right has he to ruin my happiness with his caprices? I love you—by right of this love, you are mine—mine rather than his! I will make him understand this, you shall see. Where is he? Where can I find him?"

Already he was starting to go, he knew not where, Marie-Anne caught him by the arm.

"Remain," she commanded, "remain! So you have failed to understand me, Maurice. Ah, well! you must know the truth. I am acquainted now with the reasons of my father's refusal; and though his decision should cost me my life, I approve it. Do not go to find my father. If moved by your prayers, he gave his consent, I should have the courage to refuse mine!"

Maurice was so beside himself that this reply did not enlighten him. Crazed with anger and despair, and with no remorse for the insult he addressed to this woman whom he loved so deeply, he exclaimed:

"Is it for Chanlouineau, then, that you are reserving your consent? He believes so since he goes about everywhere saying that you will soon be his wife."

Marie-Anne shuddered as if a knife had entered her very heart; and yet there was more sorrow than anger in the glance she cast upon Maurice.

"Must I stoop so low as to defend myself from such an imputation?" she asked sadly. "Must I declare that if even I suspect such an arrangement between Chanlouineau and my father, I have not been consulted? Must I tell you that there are some sacrifices which are beyond the strength of poor human nature? Understand this: I have found strength to renounce the man I love—I shall never be able to accept another in his place!"

Maurice hung his head, abashed by her earnest words, dazzled by the sublime expression of her face.

Reason returned; he realized the enormity of his suspicions, and was horrified with himself for having dared to give utterance to them.

"Oh! pardon!" he faltered, "pardon!"

What did the mysterious causes of all these events which had so rapidly succeeded each other, or M. Lacheneur's secrets, or Marie-Anne's reticence, matter to him now?

He was seeking some chance of salvation; he believed that he had found it.

"We must fly!" he exclaimed; "fly at once without pausing to look back. Before night we shall have passed the frontier."

He sprang towards her with outstretched arms, as if to seize her and bear her away; but she checked him by a single look.

"Fly!" said she, reproachfully; "fly!—and is it you, Maurice, who counsel me thus? What! while misfortune is crushing my poor father to the earth, shall I add despair and shame to his sorrows? His friends have deserted him; shall I, his daughter, also abandon him? Ah! if I did that, I should be the vilest, the most cowardly of creatures! If my father, yesterday, when I believed him the owner of Sairmeuse, had demanded the sacrifice to which I consented last evening, I might, perhaps, have resolved upon the extreme measure you have counselled. In broad daylight I might have left Sairmeuse on the arm of my lover. It is not the world that I fear! But if one might consent to fly from the chateau of a rich and happy father, one *cannot* consent to desert the poor abode of a despairing and penniless parent. Leave me, Maurice, where honor holds me. It will not be difficult for me, who am the daughter of generations of peasants, to become a peasant. Go!—I cannot endure more! Go! and remember that one cannot be utterly wretched if one's conscience is clean, and one's duty fulfilled!"

Maurice was about to reply, when a crackling of dry branches made him turn his head.

Scarcely ten paces off, Martial de Sairmeuse was standing motionless, leaning upon his gun.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE Duke de Sairmeuse had slept little and poorly on the night following his return, or his restoration, as he styled it.

Inacccessible, as he pretended to be, to the emotions which agitate the common herd, the scenes of the day had greatly excited him.

He could not help reviewing them, although he made it the rule of his life never to reflect.

While exposed to the scrutiny of the peasants and of his acquaintances at the Chateau de Courtornieu, he felt that his honor required him to appear cold and indifferent, but as soon as he had retired to the privacy of his own chamber, he gave free vent to his excessive joy.

For his joy *was* intense, almost verging on delirium.

Now he was forced to admit to himself

the immense service Lacheneur had rendered him in restoring Sairmeuse.

This poor man to whom he had displayed the blackest ingratitude, this man, honest to heroism, whom he had treated as an unfaithful servant, had just relieved him of an anxiety which had poisoned his life.

Lacheneur had just placed the Duke de Sairmeuse beyond the reach of a not probable, but very possible calamity which he had dreaded for some time.

If his secret anxiety had been made known, it would have created much merriment.

"Nonsense!" people would have exclaimed, "every one knows that the Sairmeuse possesses property to the amount of at least eight or ten millions, in England."

This was true. Only these millions, which had accrued from the estate of the duchess and of Lord Holland, had not been bequeathed to the duke.

He enjoyed absolute control of this enormous fortune; he disposed of the capital and of the immense revenues to please himself; but it all belonged to his son—to his only son.

The duke possessed nothing—a pitiful income of twelve hundred francs, perhaps; but, strictly speaking, not even the means of subsistence.

Martial, certainly, had never said a word which would lead him to suspect that he had any intention of removing his property from his father's control; but he might possibly utter this word.

Had he not good reason to believe that sooner or later this fatal word would be uttered?

And even at the thought of such a contingency he shuddered with horror.

He saw himself reduced to a pension, a very handsome pension, undoubtedly, but still a fixed, immutable, regular pension, by which he would be obliged to regulate his expenditures.

He would be obliged to calculate that two ends might meet—he, who had been accustomed to inexhaustible coffers.

"And this will necessarily happen sooner or later," he thought. "If Martial should marry, or if he should become ambitious, or meet with evil counsellors, that will be the end of my reign."

He watched and studied his son as a jealous woman studies and watches the lover she mistrusts. He thought he read in his eyes many thoughts which were not there; and according as he saw him, gay or sad, careless or preoccupied, he was reassured or still more alarmed.

Sometimes he imagined the worst. "If I should quarrel with Martial," he thought, "he would take possession of his entire fortune, and I should be left without bread."

These torturing apprehensions were, to a man who judged the sentiments of others by his own, a terrible chastisement.

Ah! no one would have wished his existence at the price he paid for it—not even the poor wretches who envied his lot and his apparent happiness, as they saw him roll by in his magnificent carriage.

There were days when he almost went mad.

"What am I?" he exclaimed, foaming with rage. "A mere plaything in the hands of a child. My son owns me. If I displease him, he casts me aside. Yes, he can dismiss me as he would a lacquey. If I enjoy his fortune, it is only because he is willing that I should do so. I owe my very existence, as well as my luxuries, to his charity. But a moment of anger, even a caprice, may deprive me of everything."

With such ideas in his brain, the duke could not love his son.

He hated him.

He passionately envied him all the advantages he possessed—his youth, his millions, his physical beauty, and his talents, which were really of a superior order.

We meet every day mothers who are jealous of their daughters, and some fathers!

This was one of those cases.

The duke, however, showed no sign of mental disquietude; and if Martial had possessed less penetration, he would have believed that his father adored him. But if he had detected the duke's secret, he did not allow him to discover it, nor did he abuse his power.

Their manner towards each other was perfect. The duke was kind even to weakness; Martial full of deference. But their relations were not those of father and son. One was in constant fear of displeasing the other; the other was a little too sure of his power. They lived on a footing of perfect equality, like two companions of the same age.

From this trying situation, Lacheneur had rescued the duke.

The owner of Sairmeuse, an estate worth more than a million, the duke was free from his son's tyranny; he had recovered his liberty.

What brilliant projects flitted through his brain that night!

He beheld himself the richest landowner in that locality; he was the chosen friend of the king; had he not a right to aspire to anything.

Such a prospect enchanted him. He felt twenty years younger—the twenty years that had been passed in exile.

So, rising before nine o'clock, he went to awaken Martial.

On returning from dining with the Marquis de Courtornieu, the evening be-

fore, the duke had gone through the chateau; but this hasty examination by candle-light had not satisfied his curiosity. He wished to see it in detail by daylight.

Followed by his son, he explored one after another of the rooms of the princely abode; and, with every step, the recollections of his infancy crowded upon him.

Lacheneur had respected everything. The duke found articles as old as himself, religiously preserved, occupying the old familiar places from which they had never been removed.

When his inspection was concluded:

"Decidedly, marquis," he exclaimed, "this Lacheneur was not such a rascal as I supposed. I am disposed to forgive him a great deal, on account of the care which he has taken of our house in our absence."

Martial seemed engrossed in thought.

"I think, monsieur," he said, at last, "that we should testify our gratitude to this man by paying him a large indemnity."

This word excited the duke's anger.

"An indemnity!" he exclaimed. "Are you mad, marquis? Think of the income that he has received from my estate. Have you forgotten the calculation made for us last evening by the Chevalier de la Livandiere?"

"The chevalier is a fool!" declared Martial, promptly. "He forgot that Lacheneur has trebled the value of Sairmeuse. I think that our family honor requires us to bestow upon this man an indemnity of at least one hundred thousand francs. This would, moreover, be a good stroke of policy in the present state of public sentiment, and his majesty would, I am sure, be much pleased."

"Stroke of policy"—"public sentiment"—"his majesty." One might have obtained almost anything from M. de Sairmeuse by these arguments.

"Heavenly powers!" he exclaimed; "a hundred thousand francs! how you talk! It is all very well for you, with your fortune! Still, if you really think so——"

"Ah! my dear sir, is not my fortune yours? Yes, such is really my opinion. So much so, indeed, that if you will allow me to do so, I will see Lacheneur myself, and arrange the matter in such a way that his pride will not be wounded. His is a devotion which it would be well to retain."

The duke opened his eyes to their widest extent.

"Lacheneur's pride!" he murmured. "Devotion which it would be well to retain! Why do you sing in this strain? Whence comes this extraordinary interest?"

He paused, enlightened by a sudden recollection.

"I understand!" he exclaimed; "I understand. He has a pretty daughter."

Martial smiled without replying.

"Yes, pretty as a rose," continued the duke; "but one hundred thousand francs; Zounds! That is a round sum to pay for such a whim. But, if you insist upon it——"

Armed with this authorization, Maurice, two hours later, started on his mission.

The first peasant he met told him the way to the cottage which M. Lacheneur now occupied.

"Follow the river," said the man, "and when you see a pine grove upon your left, cross it."

Martial was crossing it, when he heard the sound of voices. He approached, recognized Marie-Anne and Maurice d'Escorval, and obeying an angry impulse, he paused.

CHAPTER LIV

DURING the decisive moments of life, when one's entire future depends upon a word, or a gesture, twenty contradictory inspirations can traverse the mind in the time occupied by a flash of lightning.

On the sudden apparition of the young Marquis de Sairmeuse, Maurice d'Escorval's first thought was this:

"How long has he been there? Has he been playing the spy? Has he been listening to us? What did he hear?"

His first impulse was to spring upon his enemy, to strike him in the face, and compel him to engage in a hand to hand struggle.

The thought of Anne-Marie checked him.

He reflected upon the possible, even probable results of a quarrel born of such circumstances. The combat which would ensue would cost this pure young girl her reputation. Martial would talk of it; and country people are pitiless. He saw this girl, whom he looked so devotedly upon, become the talk of the neighborhood; saw the finger of scorn pointed at her, and possessed sufficient self-control to master his anger. All these reflections had occupied only half a second.

Then, politely touching his hat, and stepping toward Martial:

"You are a stranger monsieur," said he, in a voice which was frightfully altered, "and you have doubtless lost your way?"

His words were ill-chosen, and defeated his prudent intentions. A curt "Mind your own business" would have been less wounding. He forgot that this word "stranger" was the most deadly insult that one could cast in the face of

the former *emigres*, who had returned with the allied armies.

Still the young marquis did not change his insolently nonchalant attitude.

He touched the visor of his hunting cap with his finger, and replied:

"It is true—I have lost my way."

Agitated as Marie-Anne was, she could not fail to understand that her presence was all that restrained the hatred of these two young men. Their attitude, the glance with which they measured each other, did not leave the shadow of a doubt on that score. If one was ready to spring upon the other, the other was on the alert, ready to defend himself.

The silence of nearly a moment which followed was as threatening as the profound calm which precedes the storm.

Martial was the first to break it.

"A peasant's directions are not generally remarkable for their clearness," he said, lightly; "and for more than an hour I have been seeking the house to which M. Lacheneur has retired."

"Ah!"

"I am sent to him by the Duke de Sairmeuse, my father."

Knowing what he did, Maurice supposed that these strangely rapacious individuals had some new demand to make.

"I thought," said he, "that all relations between M. Lacheneur and M. de Sairmeuse were broken off last evening at the house of the abbe."

This was said in the most provoking manner, and yet Martial never so much as frowned. He had sworn that he would remain calm, and he had strength enough to keep his word.

"If these relations—as God forbid—have been broken off." he replied, "believe me, Monsieur d'Escorval, it is no fault of ours."

"Then it is not as people say."

"What people? Who?"

"The people here in the neighborhood."

"Ah! And what do these people say?"

"The truth. That you have been guilty of an offense which a man of honor could never forgive nor forget."

The young marquis shook his head gravely.

"You are quick to condemn, sir," he said, coldly. "Permit me to hope that M. Lacheneur will be less severe than yourself; and that his resentment—just, I confess, will vanish before"—he hesitated—"before a truthful explanation."

Such an expression from the lips of this hauty young aristocrat! Was it possible?

Martial profited by the effect he had produced to advance towards Marie-Anne, and, addressing himself exclusively to her, seemed after that to ignore the presence of Maurice completely.

"For there has been a mistake—a misunderstanding, mademoiselle," he continued. "Do not doubt it. The Sairmeuse are not ingrates. How could any one have supposed that we would intentionally give offense to a—devoted friend of our family, and that at a moment when he had rendered us a most signal service! A true gentleman like my father, and a hero of probity like yours, cannot fail to esteem each other. I admit that in the scene of yesterday, M. de Sairmeuse did not appear to advantage; but the step he takes to-day proves his sincere regret."

Certainly this was not the cavalier tone which he had employed in addressing Marie-Anne, for the first time, on the square in front of the church.

He had removed his hat, he remained half inclined before her, and he spoke in a tone of profound respect, as though it were a haughty duchess, and not the humble daughter of that "rascal" Lacheneur whom he was addressing.

Was it only a *roue's* manœuvre? Or had he also involuntarily submitted to the power of this beautiful girl? It was both; and it would have been difficult for him to say where the voluntary ended, and where the involuntary began.

He continued:

"My father is an old man who has suffered cruelly. Exile is hard to bear. But if sorrows and deceptions have embittered his character, they have not changed his heart. His apparent imperiousness and arrogance conceal a kindness of heart which I have often seen degenerate into positive weakness. And—why should I not confess it?—the Duke de Sairmeuse, with his white hair, still retains the illusions of a child. He refuses to believe that the world has progressed during the past twenty years. Moreover, people had deceived him by the most absurd fabrications. To speak plainly, even while we were in Montaignac, M. Lacheneur's enemies succeeded in prejudicing my father against him."

One would have sworn that he was speaking the truth, so persuasive was his voice, so entirely did the expression of his face, his glance, and his gestures accord with his words.

And Maurice, who felt—who was certain that the young man was lying, impudently lying, was abashed by this scientific prevarication which is so universally practiced in good society, and of which he was entirely ignorant.

"But what did the marquis desire here—and why this farce?"

"Need I tell you, mademoiselle," he resumed, "all that I suffered last evening in the little drawing-room in the presbytery? No, never in my whole life can I recollect such a cruel moment. I understood, and I did honor to M. Lacheneur's heroism. Hearing of our arrival, he, without hesitation, without delay, hastened to voluntarily surrender a princely

fortune—and he was insulted. This excessive injustice horrified me. And if I did not openly protest against it—if I did not show my indignation—it was only because contradiction drives my father to the verge of frenzy. And what good would it have done for me to protest? The filial love and piety which you displayed were far more powerful in their effect than any words of mine would have been. You were scarcely out of the village before M. de Sairmeuse, already ashamed of his injustice, said to me: 'I have been wrong, but I am an old man; it is hard for me to decide to make the first advance; you, marquis, go and find M. Lacheneur, and obtain his forgiveness.'"

Marie-Anne, redder than a peony, and terribly embarrassed, lowered her eyes.

"I thank you, monsieur," she faltered, "in the name of my father——"

"Oh! do not thank me," interrupted Martial earnestly; "it will be my duty, on the contrary, to render you thanks, if you can induce M. Lacheneur to accept the reparation which is due him—and he will accept it, if you will only condescend to plead our cause. Who could resist your sweet voice, your beautiful, beseeching eyes?"

However inexperienced Maurice might be, he could no longer fail to comprehend Martial's intentions. This man whom he mortally hated already, dared to speak of love to Marie-Anne, and before him, Maurice. In other words, the marquis, not content with having ignored and insulted him, presumed to take an insolent advantage of his supposed simplicity.

The certainty of this insult sent all his blood in a boiling torrent to his brain.

He seized Martial by the arm, and with irresistible power whirled him twice around, then threw him more than ten feet, exclaiming:

"This last is too much, Marquis de Sairmeuse!"

Maurice's attitude was so threatening that Martial fully expected another attack. The violence of the shock had thrown him down upon one knee; without rising, he lifted his gun, ready to take aim.

It was not from anything like cowardice on the part of the Marquis de Sairmeuse that he decided to fire upon an unarmed foe; but the affront which he had received was so deadly and so ignoble in his opinion, that he would have shot Maurice like a dog, rather than feel the weight of his finger upon him again.

This explosion of anger from Maurice, Marie-Anne had been expecting and hoping for every moment.

She was even more inexperienced than her lover; but she was a woman, and could not fail to understand the meaning of the young marquis.

He was evidently "paying his court to her." And with what intentions! It was only too easy to divine.

Her agitation, while the marquis spoke in a more and more tender voice, changed first to stupor, then to indignation, as she realized his marvelous audacity.

After that, how could she help blessing the violence which put an end to a situation which was so insulting for her, and so humiliating for Maurice.

An ordinary woman would have thrown herself between the two men who were ready to kill each other. Marie-Anne did not move a muscle.

Was it not the duty of Maurice to protect her when she was insulted? Who, then, if not he, should defend her from the insolent gallantry of this libertine? She would have blushed, she who was energy personified, to love a weak and pusillanimous man.

But any intervention was unnecessary. Maurice comprehended that this was one of those affronts which the person insulted must not seem to suspect, under penalty of giving the offending party the advantage.

He felt that Marie-Anne must not be regarded as the cause of the quarrel!

His instant recognition of the situation, produced a powerful reaction in his mind; and he recovered, as if by magic, his coolness and the free exercise of his faculties.

"Yes," he resumed, defiantly, "this is hypocrisy enough. To dare to prate of reparation after the insults that you and yours have inflicted, is adding intentional humiliation to insult—and I will not permit it."

Martial had thrown aside his gun; he now rose and brushed the knee of his pantaloons, to which a few particles of dust had adhered, with a phlegm whose secret he had learned in England.

He was too discerning not to perceive that Maurice had disguised the true cause of his outburst of passion; but what did it matter to him? Had he avowed it, the marquis would not have been displeased.

Yet it was necessary to make some response, and to preserve the superiority which he imagined he had maintained up to that time.

"You will never know, monsieur," he said, glancing alternately at his gun and at Marie-Anne, "all that you owe to Mlle. Lacheneur. We shall meet again, I hope ——"

"You have made that remark before," Maurice interrupted, tauntingly. "Nothing is easier than to find me. The first peasant you meet will point out the house of Baron d'Escorval."

"*Eh bien!* sir—I cannot promise that you will not see two of my friends."

"Oh! whenever it may please you!"

"Certainly; but it would gratify me to know by what right you make yourself the judge of M. Lacheneur's honor, and take it upon yourself to defend what has not been attacked. Who has given you this right?"

From Martial's sneering tone, Maurice was certain that he had overheard, at least, a part of his conversation with Marie-Anne.

"My right," he replied, "is that of friendship. If I tell you that your advances are unwelcome, it is because I know that M. Lacheneur will accept nothing from you. No, nothing, under whatever guise you may offer these alms which you tender merely to appease your own conscience. He will never forgive the affront which is his honor and your shame. Ah! you thought to degrade him, Messieurs de Sairmeuse! and you have lifted him far above your mock grandeur. *He* receive anything from you! Go, learn that your millions will never give you a pleasure equal to the ineffable joy he will feel, when seeing you roll by in your carriage, he says to himself: 'Those people owe everything to me!'"

His burning words vibrated with such intensity of feeling that Marie-Anne could not resist the impulse to press his hand; and this gesture was his revenge upon Martial, who turned pale with passion.

"But I have still another right," continued Maurice. "My father yesterday had the honor of asking of M. Lacheneur the hand of his daughter——"

"And I refused it!" cried a terrible voice.

Marie-Anne and both young men turned with the same movement of alarm and surprise.

M. Lacheneur stood before them, and by his side was Chanlouineau, who surveyed the group with threatening eyes.

"Yes, I refused it," resumed M. Lacheneur, "and I do not believe that my daughter will marry any one without my consent. What did you promise me this morning, Marie-Anne? Can it be you, you who grant a rendezvous to gallants in the forest? Return to the house, instantly——"

"But father——"

"Return!" he repeated with an oath, "return, I command you."

She obeyed and departed, not without giving Maurice a look in which he read a farewell that she believed would be eternal.

As soon as she had gone, perhaps twenty paces, M. Lacheneur, with folded arms, confronted Maurice.

"As for you, Monsieur d'Escorval," said he, rudely, "I hope that you will no longer undertake to prowl around my daughter——"

"I swear to you, monsieur——"

"Oh, no oaths, if you please. It is an evil action to endeavor to turn a young girl from her duty, which is obedience. You have broken forever all relations between your family and mine."

The poor youth tried to excuse himself; but M. Lacheneur interrupted him.

"Enough! enough!" said he, "go back to your home."

And as Maurice hesitated, he seized him by the collar and dragged him to the little foot-path, leading through the grove.

It was the work of scarcely ten seconds, and yet, he found time to whisper in the young man's ear, in his formerly friendly tones:

"Go, you little wretch! do you wish to render all my precautions useless?"

He watched Maurice as he disappeared, bewildered by the scene he had just witnessed, and stupefied by what he had just heard; and it was not until he saw that young D'Escorval was out of hearing, that he turned to Martial.

"As I have had the honor of meeting you, Monsieur le Marquis," said he, "I deem it my duty to inform you that Chupin and his sons are searching for you everywhere. It is at the instance of the duke, your father, who is anxious for you to repair at once to the chateau de Courtornieu."

He turned to Chanlouineau, and added:

"We will now proceed on our way."

But Martial detained him with a gesture.

"I am much surprised to hear that they are seeking me," said he.

"My father knows very well where he sent me—I was going to your house, monsieur, and at his request."

"To my house?"

"To your house, yes, monsieur, to express our sincere regret at the scene which took place at the presbytery last evening."

And without waiting for any response, Martial, with wonderful cleverness and felicity of expression, began to repeat to the father the story which he had just related to the daughter.

According to his version, his father and himself were in despair. How could M. Lacheneur suppose them guilty of such black ingratitude? Why had he retired so precipitately? The Duke de Sairmeuse held at M. Lacheneur's disposal any amount which it might please him to mention—sixty, a hundred thousand francs, even more.

But M. Lacheneur did not appear to be dazzled in the least; and when Martial had concluded, he replied, respectfully

but coldly, that he would consider the matter.

This coldness amazed Chanlouineau; he did not conceal the fact when the marquis, after many earnest protestations, at last wended his way homeward.

"We have misjudged these people," he declared.

But M. Lacheneur shrugged his shoulders.

"And so you are foolish enough to suppose that it was to me that he offered all that money?"

"Zounds! I have ears."

"Ah well! my poor boy, you must not believe all they hear, if you have. The truth is, that these large sums were intended to win the favor of my daughter. She has pleased this coxcomb of a marquis; and—he wishes to make her his mistress——"

Chanlouineau stopped short, with eyes flashing, and hands clenched.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, "prove that, and I am yours, body and soul—to do anything you desire?"

CHAPTER LV.

"No, never in my whole life have I met a woman who can compare with this Marie-Anne! What grace and what dignity! Ah! her beauty is divine!"

So Martial was thinking while returning to Sairmeuse after his proposals to M. Lacheneur.

At the risk of losing his way he took the shortest course, which led across the fields and over ditches, which he leaped with the aid of his gun.

He found a pleasure, entirely novel and very delightful, in picturing Marie-Anne as he had just seen her, blushing and paling, about to swoon, then lifting her head haughtily in her pride and disdain.

Who would have suspected that such indomitable energy, and such an impassioned soul, was hidden beneath such girlish artlessness and apparent coldness? What an adorable expression illumined her face, what passion shone in those great black eyes when she looked at that little fool D'Escorval? What would not one give to be regarded thus, even for a moment? How could the boy help being crazy about her?

He himself, loved her, without being, as yet, willing to confess it. What other name could be given to this passion which had overpowered reason, and to the furious desires which agitated him.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "she shall be mine. Yes, she shall be mine—I will have her!"

Consequently he began to study the strategic side of the undertaking which this resolution involved with the sagacity of one who had not been without an extended experience in such matters.

His *debut*, he was forced to admit, had been neither fortunate nor adroit. Conveyed compliments and money had both been rejected. If Marie-Anne had heard his covert insinuations with evident horror, M. Lacheneur had received, with even more than coldness, his advances and his offers of actual wealth.

Moreover, he remembered Chanlouineau's terrible eyes.

"How he measured me, that magnificent rustic!" he growled. "At a sign from Marie-Anne he would have crushed me like an egg-shell, without a thought of my ancestors. Ah! does he also love her? There will be three rivals in that case."

But the more difficult and even perilous the undertaking seemed, the more his passions were inflamed.

"My failures can be repaired," he thought. "Occasions of meeting shall not be wanting. Will it not be necessary to hold frequent interviews with M. Lacheneur in effecting a formal transfer of Sairmeuse? I will win him over to my side. With the daughter my course is plain. Profiting by my unfortunate experience, I will in the future, be as timid as I have been bold; and she will be hard to please if she is not flattered by this triumph of her beauty. D'Escorval remains to be disposed of——"

But this was the point upon which Martial was most exercised.

He had, it is true, seen this rival rudely dismissed by M. Lacheneur; and yet the anger of the latter had seemed to him too great to be absolutely real.

He suspected a comedy, but for whose benefit? For his, or for Chanlouineau's? And yet, what could possibly be the motive?

"And yet," he reflected, "my hands are tied; and I cannot call this little D'Escorval to account for his insolence. To swallow such an affront in silence—is hard. Still, he is brave, there is no denying that, perhaps I can find some other way to provoke his anger. But even then, what could I do? If I harmed a hair of his head, Marie-Anne would never forgive me. Ah! I would give a handsome sum in exchange for some little device to send him out of the country."

Revolving in his mind these plans, whose frightful consequences he could neither calculate nor foresee, Martial was walking up the avenue leading to the chateau, when he heard hurried footsteps behind him.

He turned, and seeing two men running after him and motioning him to stop, he paused.

It was Chupin, accompanied by one of his sons.

This old rascal had been enrolled among the servants charged with preparing Sairmeuse for the reception of the duke; and he had already discovered the secret of making himself useful to his master, which was by seeming to be indispensable.

"Ah, monsieur," he cried, "we have been searching for you everywhere, my son and I. It was M. le Duc——"

"Very well," said Martial, d yly. "I am returning——"

But Chupin was not sensative; and although he had not been very favorably received, he ventured to follow the marquis at a little distance, but sufficiently near to make himself heard. He also had his schemes; for it was not long before he began a long recital of the calumnies which had been spread about the neighborhood in regard to the Lacheneur affair. Why did he choose this subject in preference to any other? Did he suspect the young marquis' passion for Marie-Anne?

According to this report, Lacheneur—he no longer said "monsieur"—was unquestionably a rascal; the complete surrender of Sairmeuse was only a farce, as he must possess thousands, and hundreds of thousands of francs, since he was about to marry his daughter.

If the scoundrel had felt only suspicions, they were changed into certainty by the eagerness with which Martial demanded:

"How! is Mlle. Lacheneur to be married?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"And to whom."

"To Chanlouineau, the fellow whom the peasants wished to kill yesterday upon the square, because he was disrespectful to the duke. He is an avaricious man; and if Marie-Anne does not bring him a good round sum as a dowry, he will never marry her, no matter how beautiful she may be."

"Are you sure of what you say?"

"It is true. My eldest son heard from Chanlouineau and from Lacheneur that the wedding would take place within a month."

And turning to his son:

"Is it not true, boy?"

"Yes," promptly replied the youth, who had heard nothing of the kind.

Martial was silent, ashamed, perhaps, of allowing himself to listen to the gossip, but glad to have been informed of such an important circumstance.

If Chupin was not telling a falsehood—and what reason could he have for doing so—it became evident that M. Lacheneur's conduct concealed some great mystery. Why, without some potent motive, should he have refused to give his daugter to Maurice d'Escorval whom she loved, to bestow her upon a peasant?

As he reached Sairmeuse, he was swearing that he would discover this motive. A strange scene awaited him. In the broad open space extending from the front of the chateau to the *parterre* lay a huge pile of all kinds of clothing, linen, plate and furniture. One might have supposed that the occupants of the chateau were moving. A half dozen men were running to and fro, and standing in the centre of the rubbish was the Duke de Sairmeuse, giving orders.

Martial did not understand the whole meaning of the scene at first. He went to his father, and after saluting him respectfully, inquired:

"What is all this?"

M. de Sairmeuse laughed heartily.

"What, can you not guess?" he replied. "It is very simple, however. When the lawful master, on his return, sleeps beneath the bed-coverings of the usurper, it is delightful, the first night, not so pleasant on the second. Everything here reminds me too forcibly of Monsieur Lacheneur. It seems to me that I am in his house, and the thought is unendurable. So I have had them collect everything belonging to him and to his daughter—everything, in fact, which did not belong to the chateau in former years. The servants will put it all into a cart and carry it to him."

The young marquis gave fervent thanks to Heaven that he had arrived before it was too late. Had his father's project been executed, he would have been obliged to bid farewell to all his hopes.

"You surely will not do this, Monsieur le Duc?" said he, earnestly.

"And why, pray? Who will prevent me from doing it?"

"No one, most assuredly. But you will decide, on reflection, that a man who has not conducted himself *too* badly has a right to some consideration."

The duke seemed greatly astonished.

"Consideration!" he exclaimed. "This rascal has a right to some consideration! Well, this is one of the poorest of jokes. What! I give him—that is to say—you give him a hundred thousand francs, and that will not content him! He is entitled to consideration! You, who are after the daughter, may give it to him if you like, but *I* shall do as I like!"

"Very well; but, monsieur, I would think twice, if I were in your place. Lacheneur has surrendered Sairmeuse. That is all very well; but how can you authenticate your claim to the property? What would you do if, in case you imprudently irritated him, he should change his mind? What would become of your right to the estate?"

M. Sairmeuse actually turned green.

"Zounds!" he exclaimed. "I had not thought of that. Here, you fellows, take all these things back again, and that quickly!"

And as they were obeying his order:

"Now," he remarked, "let us hasten to Courtornieu. They have already sent for us twice. It must be business of the utmost importance which demands our attention."

CHAPTER LVI.

THE Chateau de Courtornieu is, next to Sairmeuse, the most magnificent habitation in the *arrondissement* of Montaignac.

The approach to the castle was by a long and narrow road, badly paved. When the carriage containing Martial and his father turned from the public highway into this rough road, the jolting aroused the duke from the profound reverie into which he had fallen on leaving Sairmeuse.

The marquis thought that he had caused this unusual fit of abstraction.

"It is the result of my adroit manœuvre," he said to himself, not without secret satisfaction. "Until the restitution of Sairmeuse is legalized, I can make my father do anything I wish; yes, anything. And if it is necessary, he will even invite Lacheneur and Marie-Anne to his table."

He was mistaken. The duke had already forgotten the affair; his most vivid impressions lasted no longer than an indentation in the sand.

He lowered the glass in front of the carriage, and, after ordering the coachman to drive more slowly:

"Now," said he to his son, "let us talk a little. Are you really in love with that litte Lacheneur?"

Martial could not repress a start. "Oh! in love," said he, lightly, "that would perhaps be saying too much. Let me say that she has taken my fancy, that will be sufficient."

The duke regarded his son with a bantering air.

"Really, you delight me!" he exclaimed. "I feared that this love affair might derange, at least for the moment, certain plans that I have formed—for I have formed certain plans for you."

"The devil!"

"Yes, I have my plans, and I will communicate them to you later in detail. I will content myself today by recommending you to examine Mlle. Blanche de Courtornieu."

Martial made no reply. This recommendation was entirely unnecessary. If Mlle. Lacheneur had made him forget Mlle. de Courtornieu that morning for some moments, the remembrance of Marie-Anne was now effaced by the radiant image of Blanche.

"Before discussing the daughter," resumed the duke, "let us speak of the father. He is one of my strongest friends; and I know him thoroughly. You have heard men reproach me for what they style my prejudices, have you not? Well, in comparison with the Marquise de Courtornieu, I am only a Jacobin."

"Oh! my father!"

"Really, nothing could be more true. If I am behind the age in which I live, he belongs to the reign of Louis XIV. Only—for there is an only—the principles which I openly avow, he keeps locked up in his snuff box—and trust him for not forgetting to open it at the opportune moment. He has suffered cruelly for his opinions, in the sense of having so often been obliged to conceal them. He concealed them, first, under the consulate, when he returned from exile. He dissimulated them even more courageously under the Empire—for he played the part of a kind of a chamberlain to Bonaparte, this dear marquis. But, chut! do not remind him of that proof of heroism; he has deplored it bitterly since the battle of Lutzen."

This was the tone in which M. de Sairmeuse was accustomed to speak of his best friends.

"The history of his fortune," he continued, "is the history of his marriages—I say *marriages*, because he has married a number of times, and always advantageously. Yes, in a period of fifteen years he has had the misfortune of losing three wives, each richer than the other. His daughter is the child of his third and last wife, a Cisse Blossac—she died in 1809. He comforted himself after each bereavement by purchasing a quantity of lands or bonds. So that now he is as rich as you are, marquis, and his influence is powerful and wide-spread. I forgot one detail, however; he believes, they tell me, in the growing power of the clergy, and has become very devout."

He checked himself; the carriage had stopped before the entrance of the Chateau de Courtornieu, and the marquis came forward to receive his guests in person. A flattering distinction, which he seldom lavished upon his visitors. The marquis was long rather than tall, and very solemn in deportment. The head that surmounted his angular form was remarkably small, a characteristic of his race, and covered with thin glossy black hair, and lighted by cold, round black eyes.

The pride that becomes a gentleman, and the humility that befits a Christian, were continually at war with each other in his countenance.

He pressed the hands of M. de Sair-

meuse and Martial, overwhelming them with compliments uttered in a thin, rather nasal voice, which, issuing from his immense body, was as astonishing as the sound of a flute issuing from the pipes of an orphicleide would be.

"At last you have come," he said; "we were waiting for you before beginning our deliberations upon a very grave, and also very delicate matter. We are thinking of addressing a petition to his majesty. The nobility, who have suffered so much during the Revolution, have a right to expect ample compensation. Our neighbors, to the number of sixteen, are now assembled in my cabinet, transformed for the time into a council chamber.

Martial shuddered at the thought of all the ridiculous and tiresome conversation he would probably be obliged to hear; and his father's recommendation occurred to him.

"Shall we not have the honor of paying our respects to Mlle. de Courtornieu?"

"My daughter must be in the drawing-room with our cousin," replied the marquis in an indifferent tone; "at least, if she is not in the garden."

This might be construed into, "Go, and look for her if you choose." At least Martial understood it in that way; and when they entered the hall, he allowed his father and the marquis to go up-stairs without him.

A servant opened the door of the drawing room for him—but it was empty.

"Very well," said he; "I know my way to the garden."

But he explored it in vain; no one was to be found.

He decided to return to the house and march bravely into the presence of the dreaded enemy. He had turned to retrace his steps when, through the foliage of a bower of jasmine, he thought he could distinguish a white dress.

He advanced softly, and his heart quickened its throbbing when he saw that he was right.

Mlle. Blanche de Courtornieu was seated on a bench beside an old lady, and was engaged in reading a letter in a low voice.

She must have been greatly preoccupied, since she had not heard Martial's footsteps approaching.

He was only ten paces from her, so near that he could distinguish the shadow of her long eyelashes.

He paused, holding his breath, in a delicious ecstacy.

"Ah! how beautiful she is!" he thought. Beautiful? no. But pretty, yes; as pretty as heart could desire, with her great velvety blue eyes and her pouting lips. She was a blonde, but one of those dazzling and radiant blondes found only in the countries of the sun; and from her hair, drawn high upon the top of her head, escaped a profusion of ravishing , glittering ringlets, which seemed almost to sparkle in the play of the light breeze.

One might, perhaps, have wished her a trifle larger. But she had the winning charm of all delicate and *mignonnes* women; and her figure was of exquisite roundness, and her dimpled hands were those of an infant.

Alas! these attractive exteriors are often deceitful, as much and even more so, than the appearances of a man like the Marquis de Courtornieu.

The apparently innocent and artless young girl possessed the parched, hollow soul of an experienced woman of the world, or of an old courtier. She had been so petted at the convent, in the capacity of only daughter of a *grand seigneur* and millionaire; she had been surrounded by so much adulation, that all her good qualities had been blighted in the bud by the poisonous breath of flattery.

She was only nineteen; and still it was impossible for any person to have been more susceptible to the charms of wealth and of satisfied ambition. She dreamed of a position at court as a school-girl dreams of a lover.

If she had deigned to notice Martial—for she had remarked him—it was only because her father had told her that this young man would lift his wife to the highest sphere of power. Thereupon she had uttered a "very well, we will see!" that would have changed an enamored suitor's love into disgust.

Martial advanced a few steps, and Mlle. Blanche, on seeing him, sprang up with a pretty affectation of intense timidity.

Bowing low before her, he said, gently and with profound deference:

"M. de Courtornieu, mademoiselle, was so kind as to tell me where I might have the honor of finding you. I had not courage to brave those formidable discussions inside; but——"

He pointed to the letter the young girl held in her hand, and added:

"But I fear that I am *de trop*."

"Oh! not in the least, Monsieur le Marquis, although this letter which I have just been reading has, I confess, interested me deeply. It was written by a poor child in whom I have taken a great interest—whom I have sent for sometimes when I was lonely—Marie-Anne Lacheneur."

Accustomed from his infancy to the hypocrisy of drawing-rooms, the young marquis had taught his face not to betray his feelings.

He couly have laughed gayly with anguish at his heart; he could have pre-

served the sternest gravity when inwardly convulsed with merriment.

And yet, this name of Marie-Anne upon the lips of Mlle. de Courtornieu, caused his glance to waver.

"They know each other!" he thought.

In an instant he was himself again; but Mlle. Blanche had perceived his momentary agitation.

"What can it mean?" she wondered, much disturbed.

Still, it was with the perfect assumption of innocence that she continued:

"In fact, you must have seen her, this poor Marie-Anne, Monsieur le Marquis, since her father was the guardian of Sairmeuse?"

"Yes, I have seen her, mademoiselle," replied Martial, quietly.

"Is she not remarkably beautiful? Her beauty is of an unusual type, it quite takes one by surprise."

A fool would have protested. The marquis was not guilty of this folly.

"Yes, she is very beautiful," said he.

This apparent frankness disconcerted Mlle. Blanche a trifle; and it was with an air of hypocritical compassion that she murmured:

"Poor girl! What will become of her? Here is her father, reduced to delving in the ground."

"Oh! you exaggerate, mademoiselle; my father will always preserve Lacheneur from anything of that kind."

"Of course—I might have known that—but where will he find a husband for Marie-Anne?"

"One has been found, already. I understand that she is to marry a youth in the neighborhood, who has some property—a certain Chanlournieu."

The artless school-girl was more cunning than the marquis. She had satisfied herself that she had just grounds for her suspicions; and she experienced a certain anger on finding him so well informed in regard to everything that concerned Mlle. Lacheneur.

"And do you believe that this is the husband of whom she had dreamed? Ah, well! God grant that she may be happy; for we were very fond of her, very—were we not, Aunt Medea?"

Aunt Medea was the old lady seated beside Mlle. Blanche.

"Yes, very," she replied.

This aunt, or cousin, rather, was a poor relation whom M. de Courtornieu had sheltered, and who was forced to pay dearly for her bread; since Mlle. Blanche compelled her to play the part of echo.

"It grieves me to see these friendly relations, which were so dear to me, broken," resumed Mlle. de Courtornieu. "But listen to what Marie-Anne has written."

She drew from her belt where she had placed it, Mlle. Lacheneur's letter and read:

"My dear Blanche—You know that the Duke de Sairmeuse has returned. The news fell upon us like a thunderbolt. My father and I had become too much accustomed to regard as our own the deposit which had been entrusted to our fidelity; we have been punished for it. At last, we have done our duty, and now all is ended. She whom you have called your friend, will be, hereafter, only a poor peasant girl, as her mother was before her."

The most subtle observer would have supposed that Mlle. Blanche was experiencing the keenest emotion. One would have sworn that it was only by intense effort that she succeeded in restraining her tears—that they were even trembling behind her long lashes.

The truth was, that she was thinking only of discovering, upon Martial's face, some indication of his feelings. But now that he was on guard, his features might have been marble for any sign of emotion they betrayed.

So she continued:

"I should utter an untruth if I said that I have not suffered on account of this sudden change. But I have courage; I shall learn how to submit. I shall, I hope, have strength to forget, for I *must* forget! The remembrances of past felicity would render my present misery intolerable."

Mlle. de Courtornieu suddenly folded up the letter.

"You have heard it, monsieur," said she. "Can you understand such pride as that?" And they accuse us, daughters of the nobility, of being proud!"

Martial made no response. He felt that his altered voice would betray him. How much more would he have been moved, if he had been allowed to read the concluding lines.

"One must live, my dear Blanche," added Marie-Anne, "and I feel no false shame in asking you to aid me. I sew very nicely, as you know, and I could earn my livelihood by embroidery if I knew more people. I will call to-day at Courtornieu to ask you to give me a list of ladies to whom I can present myself on your recommendation."

But Mlle. de Courtornieu had taken good care not to allude to the touching request. She had read the letter to Martial as a test. She had not succeeded; so much the worse. She rose and accepted his arm to return to the house.

She seemed to have forgotten her

friend, and she was chatting gayly. When they approached the chateau, she was interrupted by a sound of voices raised to the highest pitch.

It was the address to the king which was agitating the council convened in M. de Courtornieu's cabinet.

Mlle. Blanche paused.

"I am tresspassing upon your kindness, monsieur. I am boring you with my silly chat when you should undoubtedly be up there."

"Certainly not," he replied, laughing. "What should I do there? The *role* of men of action does not begin until the orators have concluded."

He spoke so energetically, in spite of his jesting tone, that Mlle. de Courtornieu was fascinated. She saw before her, she believed, a man who, as her father had said, would rise to the highest position in the political world.

Unfortunately, her admiration was disturbed by a ring of the great bell that always announces visitors.

She trembled, let go her hold on Martial's arm, and said, very earnestly:

"Ah, no matter. I wish very much to know what is going on up there. If I ask my father, he will laugh at my curiosity, while you, monsieur, if you are present at the conference, you will tell me all."

A wish thus expressed was a command. The marquis bowed and obeyed.

"She dismisses me," he said to himself as he ascended the staircase, "nothing could be more evident; and that without much ceremony. Why the devil does she wish to get rid of me?"

Why? Because a single peal of the bell announced a visitor for Mlle. Blanche; because she was expecting a visit from her friend; and because she wished at any cost to prevent a meeting between Martial and Marie-Anne.

She did not love him, and yet an agony of jealousy was torturing her. Such was her nature.

Her presentiments were realized. It was, indeed, Mademoiselle Lacheneur who was awaiting her in the drawing-room.

The poor girl was paler than usual; but nothing in her manner betrayed the frightful anguish she had suffered during the past two or three days.

And her voice, in asking from her former friend a list of "customers," was as calm and as natural as in other days, when she was asking her to come and spend an afternoon at Sairmeuse.

So, when the two girls embraced each other, their roles were reversed.

It was Marie-Anne who had been crushed by misfortune; it was Mlle. Blanche who wept.

But, while writing a list of the names of persons in the neighborhood with whom she was acquainted, Mlle. de Courtornieu did not neglect this favorable opportunity for verifying the suspicions which had been aroused by Martial's momentary agitation.

"It is inconceivable," she remarked to her friend, "that the Duke de Sairmeuse should allow you to be reduced to such an extremity."

Marie-Anne's nature was so royal, that she did not wish an unjust accusation to rest even upon the man who had treated her father so cruelly.

"The duke is not to blame," she replied gently; "he offered us a very considerable sum, this morning, through his son."

Mlle. Blanche started as if a viper had stung her.

"So you have seen the marquis, Marie-Anne?"

"Yes."

"Has he been to your house?"

"He was going there, when he met me in the grove on the waste."

She blushed as she spoke; she turned crimson at the thought of Martial's impertinent gallantry.

This girl who had just emerged from a convent was terribly experienced; but she misunderstood the cause of Marie-Anne's confusion. She could dissimulate, however, and when Marie-Anne went away, Mlle. Blanche embraced her with every sign of the most ardent affection. But she was almost suffocated with rage.

"What!" she thought; "they have met but once, and yet they are so strongly impressed with each other! Do they love each other already?"

CHAPTER LVII.

If Martial had faithfully reported to Mademoiselle Blanche all that he heard in the Marquis de Courtornieu's cabinet, he would probably have astonished her a little.

He, himself, if he had sincerely confessed his impressions and his reflections, would have been obliged to admit that he was greatly amazed.

But this unfortunate man, who, in days to come, would be compelled to reproach himself bitterly, for the excess of his fanaticism refused to confess this truth even to himself. His life was to be spent in defending prejudices which his own reason condemned.

Forced by Mademoiselle Blanche's will into the midst of a discussion, he was really disgusted with the ridiculous and intense greediness of M. de Courtornieu's noble guests.

Decorations, fortune, honors, power—they desired everything.

They were satisfied that their pure devotion deserved the most munificent re-

wards. It was only the most modest who declared that he would be content with the epaulettes of a lieutenant-general.

Many were the recriminations, stinging words, and bitter reproaches.

The Marquis de Courtornieu, who acted as president of the council, was nearly exhausted with exclaiming:

"Be calm, gentlemen, be calm! A little moderation, if you please!"

"All these men are mad," thought Martial, with difficulty restraining an intense desire to laugh; "they are insane enough to be placed in a mad-house."

But he was not obliged to render a report of the *seance*. The deliberations were soon fortunately interrupted by a summons to dinner.

Mademoiselle Blanche, when the young marquis rejoined her, quite forgot to question him about the doings of the council.

In fact, what did the hopes and plans of these people matter to her.

She cared very little about them or about the people themselves, since they were below her father in rank, and most of them were not as rich.

An absorbing thought—a thought of her future, and of her happiness, filled her mind to the exclusion of all other subjects.

The few moments that she had passed alone, after Marie-Anne's departure, she had spent in grave reflection.

Martial's mind and person pleased her. In him were combined all the qualifications which any ambitious woman would desire in a husband—and she decided that he should be *her* husband. Probably she would not have arrived at this conclusion so quickly, had it not been for the feeling of jealousy aroused in her heart. But from the very moment that she could believe or suspect that another woman was likely to dispute the possession of Martial with her, she desired him.

From that moment, she was completely controlled by one of those strange passions in which the heart has no part, but which take entire possession of the brain and lead to the worst of follies.

Let the woman whose pulse has never quickened its beating under the influence of this counterfeit of love, cast the first stone.

That she could be vanquished in this struggle for supremacy; that there could be any doubt of the result, were thoughts which never once entered the mind of Mlle. Blanche.

She had been told so often, it had been repeated again and again that the man whom she would choose must esteem himself fortunate above all others.

She had seen her father besieged by so many suitors for her hand.

"Besides," she thought, smiling proudly, as she surveyed her reflection in the large mirrors; "am I not as pretty as Marie-Anne?"

"Far prettier!" murmured the voice of vanity; "and you possess what your rival does not: birth, wit, the genius of coquetry!"

She did, indeed, possess sufficient cleverness and patience to assume and to sustain the character which seemed most likely to dazzle and to fascinate Martial.

As to maintaining this character *after* marriage, if it did not please her to do so, that was another matter!

The result of all this was that during dinner Mlle. Blanche exercised all her powers of fascination upon the young marquis.

She was so evidently desirous of pleasing him that several of the guests remarked it.

Some were even shocked by such a breach of conventionality. But Blanche de Courtornieu could do as she chose; she was well aware of that. Was she not the richest heiress for miles and miles around? No slander can tarnish the brilliancy of a fortune of more than a million in hard cash.

"Do you know that those two young people will have a joint income of between seven and eight hundred thousand francs!" said one old viscount to his neighbor.

Martial yielded unresistingly to the charm of his position.

How could he suspect unworthy motives in a young girl whose eyes were so pure, whose laugh rung out with the crystalline clearness of childhood!

Involuntarily he compared her with the grave and thoughtful Marie-Anne, and his imagination floated from one to the other, inflamed by the strangeness of the contrast.

He occupied a seat beside Mlle. Blanche at table; and they chatted gayly, amusing themselves at the expense of the other guests, who were again conversing upon political matters, and whose enthusiasm waxed warmer and warmer as course succeeded course.

Champagne was served with the dessert; and the company drank to the allies whose victorious bayonets had forced a passage for the king to return to Paris; they drank to the English, to the Prussians, and to the Russians whose horses were trampling our crops under foot.

The name of d'Escorval heard above the clink of the glasses, suddenly aroused Martial from his dream of enchantment.

An old gentleman had just risen, and proposed that active measures should be taken to rid the neighborhood of the Baron d'Escorval.

"The presence of such a man dishonors our country," said he, "he is a frantic

Jacobin, and admitted to be dangerous, since M. Fouche, has him upon his list of suspected persons; and he is even now under the surveillance of the police."

This discourse could not have failed to arouse intense anxiety in M. d'Escorval's breast had he seen the ferocity expressed on almost every face.

Still no one spoke: hesitation could be read in every eye.

Martial, too, had turned so white that Mlle. Blanche remarked his pallor and thought he was ill.

It fact, a terrible struggle was going on in the soul of the young marquis; a conflict between his honor and passion.

Had he not longed only a few hours before, to find some way of driving Maurice from the country?

Ah, well! the opportunity he so ardently desired now presented itself. It was impossible to imagine a better one. If the proposed step was taken, the Baron d'Escorval and his family would be forced to leave France forever!

The company hesitated; Maurice saw it, and felt that a single word from him, for or against, would decide the matter.

After a few hours of frightful uncertainty, honor triumphed.

He rose and declared that the proposed measure was bad—impolitic.

"M. d'Escorval," he remarked, "is one of those men who diffuse around them a perfume of honesty and justice. Have the good sense to respect the consideration which is justly his."

As he had foreseen, his words decided the matter. The cold and haughty manner which he knew so well how to assume, his few but incisive words, produced a great effect.

"It would evidently be a great mistake!" was the general cry.

Martial reseated himself; Mademoiselle Blanche leaned towards him.

"You have done well," she murmured; "you know how to defend your friends.,'

"M. d'Escorval is not my friend," replied Martial, in a voice which revealed the struggle through which he had passed. "The injustice of the proposed measure incensed me, that is all."

Mademoiselle de Courtornieu was not to be deceived by an explanation like this. Still she added:

"Then your conduct is all the more grand, monsieur."

But such was not the opinion of the Duke de Sairmeuse. On returning to the chateau some hours later, he reproached his son for his intervention.

"Why the devil did you meddle with the matter?" inquired the duke. "I would not have liked to take upon myself the odium of the proposition, but since it had been made——"

"I was anxious to prevent such an act of useless folly!"

"Useless folly! Zounds! marquis, you carry matters with a high hand. Do you think that this d——d baron adores you? What would you say if you heard that he was conspiring against us?"

"I should answer with a shrug of the shoulders."

"You would! Very well; do me the favor to question Chupin."

CHAPTER LVIII.

It was only two weeks since the Duke de Sairmeuse had returned to France; he had not yet had time to shake the dust of exile from his feet, and already his imagination saw enemies on every side.

He had been at Sairmeuse only two days, and yet he unhesitatingly accepted the venomous reports which Chupin poured into his ears.

The suspicions which he was endeavoring to make Martial share were cruelly unjust.

At the moment when the duke accused the baron of conspiring against the house of Sairmeuse, that unfortunate man was weeping at the bedside of his son, who was, he believed, at the point of death.

Maurice was indeed dangerously ill.

His excessively nervous organization had succumbed before the rude assaults of destiny.

When, in obedience to M. Lacheneur's imperative order, he left the grove on the Reche, he lost the power of reflecting calmly and deliberately upon the situation.

Marie-Anne's incomprehensible obstinacy, the insults he had received from the marquis, and Lacheneur's feigned anger were mingled in inextricable confusion, forming one immense, intolerable misfortune, too crushing for his powers of resistance.

The peasants who met him on his homeward way were struck by his singular demeanor, and felt convinced that some great catastrophe had just befallen the house of the Baron d'Escorval.

Some bowed; others spoke to him, but he did not see or hear them.

Force of habit—that physical memory which mounts guard when the mind is far away—brought him back to his home.

His features were so distorted with suffering that Mme. d'Escorval, on seeing him, was seized with a most sinister presentiment, and dared not address him.

He spoke first.

"All is over!" he said hoarsely, "but do not be worried, mother; I have some courage, as you shall see."

He did, in fact, seat himself at the table with a resolute air. He ate even more than usual; and his father noticed,

without alluding to it, that he drank much more wine than usual.

He was very pale, his eyes glittered, his gestures were excited, and his voice was husky. He talked a great deal, and even jested.

"Why will he not weep," thought Mme. d'Escorval; "then I should not be so much alarmed, and I could try to comfort him."

This was Maurice's last effort. When dinner was over he went to his room, and when his mother, who had gone again and again to listen at his door, finally decided to enter his chamber, she found him lying upon the bed, muttering incoherently.

She approached him. He did not appear to recognize or even to see her. She spoke to him. He did not seem to hear. His face was scarlet, his lips were parched. She took his hand; it was burning; and still he was shivering, and his teeth were chattering as if with cold.

A mist swam before the eyes of the poor woman; she feared she was about to faint; but, summoning all her strength, she conquered her weakness and dragging herself to the staircase, she cried:

"Help! help! My son is dying!"

With a bound M. d'Escorval reached his son's chamber, looked at him and dashed out again, summoned a servant, and ordered him to gallop to Montaignac and bring a physician without a moment's delay.

There was, indeed, a doctor at Sairmeuse, but he was the most stupid of men—a former surgeon in the army, who had been dismissed for incompetency. The peasants shunned him as they would the plague; and in case of sickness always sent for the *cure*. M. d'Escorval followed their example, knowing that the physician from Montaignac could not arrive until nearly morning.

Abbe Midon had never frequented the medical schools, but since he had been a priest the poor so often asked advice of him that he applied himself to the study of medicine, and, aided by experience, he had acquired a knowledge of the art which would have won him a diploma from the faculty anywhere.

At whatever hour of the day or night parishioners came to ask his assistance, he was always ready—his only answer: "Let us go at once."

And when the people of the neighborhood met him on the road with his little box of medicine slung over his shoulder, they took off their hats respectfully and stood aside to let him pass. Those who did not respect the priest honored the man.

For M. d'Escorval, above all others, Abbe Midon would make haste. The baron was his friend; and a terrible apprehension seized him when he saw Mme. d'Escorval at the gate watching for him. By the way in which she rushed to meet him, he thought she was about to announce some irreparable misfortune. But, no—she took his hand, and, without uttering a word, she led him to her son's chamber.

The condition of the poor youth was really very critical; the abbe perceived this at a glance, but it was not hopeless.

"We will get him out of this," he said with a smile that re-awakened hope.

And with the coolness of an old practitioner, he bled him freely, and ordered applications of ice to his head.

In a moment all the household were busied in fulfilling the *cure's* orders. He took advantage of the opportunity to draw the baron aside in the embrasure of a window.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"A disappointment in love," M. d'Escorval replied, with a despairing gesture. "M. Lacheneur has refused the hand of his daughter, which I asked in behalf of my son. Maurice was to have seen Marie-Anne to-day. What passed between them I do not know. The result you see."

The baroness re-entered the room, and the two men said no more A truly funereal silence pervaded the apartment, broken only by the moans of Maurice.

His excitement instead of abating had increased in violence. Delirium peopled his brain with phantoms; and the name of Marie-Anne, Martial de Sairmeuse, and Chanlouineau dropped so incoherently from his lips that it was impossible to read his thoughts.

How long that night seemed to M. d'Escorval and his wife, those only know who have counted each second beside the sick bed of some loved one.

Certainly their confidence in the companion in their vigil was great; but he was not a regular physician like the other, the one whose coming they awaited.

Just as the light of the morning made the candles turn pale, they heard the furious gallop of a horse, and soon the doctor from Montaignac entered.

He examined Maurice carefully, and after a short conference with the priest:

"I see no immediate danger," he declared. "All that can be done has been done. The malady must be allowed to take its course. I will return."

He did return the next day and many days after, for it was not until a week had passed that Maurice was declared out of danger.

Then he confided to his father all that had taken place in the grove on the Reche. The slightest detail of the scene had engraved itself indelibly upon his memory. When the recital was ended:

"Are you quite sure," asked his father, "that you correctly understood Marie-

Anne's reply? Did she tell you that if her father gave his consent to your marriage, she would refuse her s?

"Those were her very words."

"And still she loves you?"

"I am sure of it."

"You were not mistaken in M. Lacheneur's tone when he said to you: 'Go, you little wretch! do you wish to render all my precautions useless?' "

"No."

M. d'Escorval sat for a moment in silence.

"This passes comprehension," he murmured at last.

And so low that his son could not hear him, he added:

"I will see Lacheneur to-morrow; this mystery must be explained."

CHAPTER LIX.

THE cottage where M. Lacheneur had taken refuge was situated on a hill overlooking the water.

It was, as he had said, a small and humble dwelling, but it was rather less miserable than the abodes of most of the peasants of the district.

It was only one story high, but it was divided into three rooms, and the roof was covered with thatch.

In front was a tiny garden, in which a few fruit trees, some withered cabbages, and a vine which covered the cottage to the roof, managed to find subsistence.

This garden was a mere nothing, but even this slight conquest over the sterility of the soil had cost Lacheneur's deceased aunt almost unlimited courage and patience.

For more than twenty years the poor woman had never, for a single day, failed to throw upon her garden three or four basketfuls of richer soil, which she was obliged to bring more than half a league.

It had been more than a year since she died; but the little pathway which her patient feet had worn in the performance of this daily task was still distinctly visible.

This was the path which M. d'Escorval, faithful to his resolution, took the following day, in the hope of wresting from Marie-Anne's father the secret of his inexplicable conduct.

He was so engrossed in his own thoughts that he failed to notice the overpowering heat as he climbed the rough hillside in the full glare of the noonday sun.

When he reached the summit, however, he paused to take breath; and while wiping the perspiration from his brow, he turned to look back on the road which he had traversed.

It was the first time he had visited the spot, and he was surprised at the extent of the landscape which stretched before him.

From this point, which is the most elevated in the surrounding country, one can survey the entire valley of the Oiselle, and discern, in the distance, the redoubtable citadel of Montaignac, built upon an almost inaccessible rock.

This last circumstance, which the baron was afterwards doomed to recall in the midst of the most terrible scenes, did not strike him then. Lacheneur's house absorbed all his attention.

His imagination pictured vividly the sufferings of this unfortunate man, who, only two days before, had relinquished the splendors of the Chateau de Sairmeuse to repair to this wretched abode.

He rapped at the door of the cottage.

"Come in!" said a voice.

The baron lifted the latch and entered.

The room was small, with whitewashed walls, but with no other floor than the ground; no ceiling save the thatch that formed the roof.

A bed, a table and two wooden benches constituted the entire furniture.

Seated upon a stool, near the tiny window, sat Marie-Anne, busily at work upon a piece of embroidery.

She had abandoned her former mode of dress, and her costume was that worn by the peasant girls.

When M. d'Escorval entered she rose, and for a moment they remained silently standing, face to face, she apparently calm, he visibly agitated.

He was looking at Marie-Anne; and she seemed to him transfigured. She was much paler and considerably thinner; but her beauty had a strange and touching charm—the sublime radiance of heroic resignation and of duty nobly fulfilled.

Still, remembering his son, he was astonished to see this tranquillity.

"You do not ask me for news of Maurice," he said, reproachfully.

"I had news of him this morning, monsieur, as I have had every day. I know that he is improving; and that, since day before yesterday, he has been allowed to take a little nourishment."

"You have not forgotten him, then?"

She trembled; a faint blush suffused throat and forehead, but it was in a calm voice that she replied:

"Maurice knows that it would be impossible for me to forget him, even if I wished to do so."

"And yet you have told him that you approve your father's decision!"

"I told him so, monsieur; and I shall have the courage to repeat it."

"But you have made Maurice wretched, unhappy, child; he has almost died."

She raised her head proudly, sought

M. d'Escorval's eyes, and when she had found them:

"Look at me, monsieur. Do you think that I, too, do not suffer?"

M. d'Escorval was abashed for a moment; but recovering himself, he took Marie-Anne's hand, and pressing it affectionately, he said:

"So Maurice loves you; you love him; you suffer; he has nearly died, and still you reject him!"

"It must be so, monsieur."

"You say this, my dear child—you say this, and you undoubtedly believe it. But I, who have sought to discover the necessity of this immense sacrifice, have failed to find it. Explain to me, then, why this must be so, Marie-Anne. Who knows but you are frightened by chimeras which my experience can scatter with a breath? Have you no confidence in me? Am I not an old friend? It may be that your father, in his despair, has adopted extreme resolutions. Speak, let us combat them together. Lacheneur knows how devotedly I am attached to him. I will speak to him; he will listen to *me*."

"I can tell you nothing, monsieur."

"What! you are so cruel as to remain inflexible when a father entreats you on his knees—a father who says to you: 'Marie-Anne, you hold in your hands the happiness, the life, the reason of my son——'"

Tears glittered in Marie-Anne's eyes, but she drew away her hand.

"Ah! it is you who are cruel, monsieur; it is you who are without pity. Do you not see what I suffer, and that it is impossible for me to endure further torture? No, I have nothing so tell you; there is nothing you can say to my father. Why do you seek to impair my courage when I require it all to struggle against my despair? Maurice must forget me; he must never see me again. This is fate; and he must not fight against it. It would be folly. We are parted forever. Beseech Maurice to leave the country, and if he refuses, you, who are his father, must command him to do so. And you, too, monsieur, in Heaven's name flee from us. We shall bring misfortune upon you. Never return here; our house is accursed. The fate that overshadows us will ruin you also."

She spoke almost wildly. Her voice was so loud that it penetrated an adjoining room.

The communicating door opened, and M. Lacheneur appeared upon the threshold.

At the sight of M. d'Escorval he uttered an oath. But there was more sorrow and anxiety than anger in his manner, as he said:

"You, monsieur, you here!"

The consternation into which Marie-Anne's words had thrown M. d'Escorval was so intense that it was with great difficulty he stammered out a response.

"You have abandoned us entirely; I was anxious about you. Have you forgotten our old friendship? I come to you——"

The brow of the former master of Sairmeuse remained overcast.

"Why did you not inform me of the honor that the baron had done me, Marie-Anne?" he said sternly.

She tried to speak, but could not; and it was the baron who replied:

"Why, I have but just come, my dear friend."

M. Lacheneur looked suspiciously, first at his daughter, then at the baron.

"What did they say to each other while they were alone?" he was evidently wondering.

But, however great may have been his disquietude, he seemed to master it; and it was with his old-time affability of manner that he invited M. d'Escorval to follow him into the adjoining room.

"It is my reception-room and my cabinet combined," he said, smiling.

This room, which was much larger than the first, was as scantily furnished; but it contained several piles of small books and an infinite number of tiny packages."

Two men were engaged in arranging and sorting these articles.

One was Chanlouineau.

M. d'Escorval did not remember that he had ever seen the other, who was a young man.

"This is my son, Jean, monsieur," said Lacheneur. "He has changed since you last saw him ten years ago."

It was true. It had been, at least, ten years since the baron had seen Lacheneur's son.

How time flies! He had left him a boy; he found him a man.

Jean was just twenty; but his haggard features and his precocious beard made him appear much older.

He was tall and well formed, and his face indicated more than average intelligence.

Still he did not impress one favorably. His restless eyes were always invading yours; and his smile betrayed an unusual degree of shrewdness, amounting almost to cunning.

As his father presented him, he bowed profoundly; but he was very evidently out of temper.

M. Lacheneur resumed:

"Having no longer the means to maintain Jean in Paris, I have made him return. My ruin will, perhaps, be a blessing to him. The air of great cities is not good for the son of a peasant. Fools that we are, we send them there to

teach them to rise above their fathers. But they do nothing of the kind. They think only of degrading themselves."

"Father," interrupted the young man; "father, wait, at least, until we are alone!"

"M. d'Escorval is not a stranger."

Chanlouineau evidently sided with the son, since he made repeated signs to M. Lacheneur to be silent.

Either he did not see them, or he pretended not to see them, for he continued:

"I must have wearied you, monsieur, by telling you again and again: 'I am pleased with my son. He has a commendable ambition; he is working faithfully; he will succeed.' Ah! I was a poor, foolish father! The friend who carried Jean the order to return has enlightened me, to my sorrow. This model young man you see here left the gaming-house only to run to public balls. He was in love with a wretched little ballet girl in some low theatre; and to please this creature, he also went upon the stage, with his face painted red and white."

"To appear upon the stage is not a crime."

"No; but it is a crime to deceive one's father and to affect virtues which one does not possess! Have I ever refused you money? No. Notwithstanding that, you have contracted debts everywhere, and you owe at least twenty thousand francs?"

Jean hung his head; he was evidently angry, but he feared his father.

"Twenty thousand francs!" repeated M. Lacheneur. "I had them a fortnight ago; now I have nothing. I can hope to obtain this sum only through the generosity of the Duke de Sairmeuse and his son."

These words from Lacheneur's lips astonished the baron.

Lacheneur perceived it, and it was with every appearance of sincerity and good faith that he resumed:

"Does what I say surprise you? I understand why. My anger at first made me give utterance to all sorts of absurd threats. But I am calm now, and I realize my injustice. What could I expect the duke to do? To make me a present of Sairmeuse? He was a trifle brusque, I confess, but that is his way; at heart he is the best of men."

"Have you seen him again?"

"No; but I have seen his son. I have even been with him to the chateau to designate the articles which I desire to keep. Oh! he refused me nothing. Everything was placed at my disposal—everything. I selected what I wished—furniture, clothing, linen. It is all to be brought here; and I shall be quite a *grand seigneur*."

"Why not seek another house? This ——"

"This pleases me, monsieur. Its situation suits me perfectly."

In fact, why should not the Sairmeuse have regretted their odious conduct? Was it impossible that Lacheneur, in spite of his indignation, should conclude to accept honorable separation? Such were M. d'Escorval's reflections.

"To say that the marquis has been kind is saying too little," continued Lacheneur. "He has shown us the most delicate attentions. For example, having noticed how much Marie-Anne regrets the loss of her flowers, he has declared that he is going to send her plants to stock our small garden, and that they shall be renewed every month."

Like all passionate men, M. Lacheneur overdid his part. This last remark was too much; it awakened a sinister suspicion in M. d'Escorval's mind.

"Good God!" he thought, "does this wretched man meditate some crime?"

He glanced at Chanlouineau, and his anxiety increased. On hearing the names of the marquis and of Marie-Anne, the robust farmer had turned livid.

"It is decided," said Lacheneur, with an air of the utmost satisfaction, "that they will give me the ten thousand francs bequeathed to me by Mlle. Armande. Moreover, I am to fix upon such a sum as I consider a just recompense for my services. And that is not all: they have offered me the position of manager at Sairmeuse; and I was to be allowed to occupy the gamekeeper's cottage, where I lived so long. But on reflection I refused this offer. After having enjoyed for so long a time a fortune which did not belong to me, I am anxious to amass a fortune of my own."

"Would it be indiscreet in me to inquire what you intend to do?"

"Not the least in the world. I am going to turn pedler."

M. d'Escorval could not believe his ears.

"Pedler?" he repeated.

"Yes, monsieur. Look, there is my pack in that corner."

"But this is absurd" exclaimed M. d'Escorval. "People can scarcely earn their daily bread in this way!"

"You are wrong, monsieur. I have considered the subject carefully; the profits are thirty per cent. And besides, there will be three of us to sell goods, for I shall confide one pack to my son, and another to Chanlouineau."

"What! Chanlouineau?"

"He has become my partner in the enterprise."

"And his farm—who will take care of that?"

"He will employ day laborers."

And then, as if wishing to make M.

d'Escorval understand that his visit had lasted quite long enough, Lacheneur began arranging the little packages which were destined to fill the pack of the traveling merchant.

But the baron was not to be gotten rid of so easily, now that his suspicions had become almost a certainty.

"I must speak with you," he said, brusquely.

M. Lacheneur turned.

"I am very busy," he replied, with a very evident reluctance.

"I ask only five minutes. But if you have not the time to spare to-day, I will return to-morrow—day after to-morrow—and every day until I can see you in private."

Lacheneur saw plainly that it would be impossible to escape this interview, so, with the gesture of a man who resigns himself to a necessity, addressing his son and Chanlouineau, he said:

"Go outside for a few moments."

They obeyed, and as soon as the door had closed behind them, Lacheneur said:

"I know very well, monsieur, the arguments you intend to advance; and the reason of your coming. You come to ask me again for Marie-Anne. I know that my refusal has nearly killed Maurice. Believe me, I have suffered cruelly at the thought; but my refusal is none the less irrevocable. There is no power in the world capable of changing my resolution. Do not ask my motives; I shall not reveal them; but rest assured that they are sufficient."

"Are we not your friends?"

"You, monsieur!" exclaimed Lacheneur, in tones of the most lively affection, "you! Ah! you know it well! You are the best, the only friends, I have here below. I should be the basest and the most miserable of men if I did not guard the recollection of all your kindness until my eyes close in death. Yes, you are my friends, yes, I am devoted to you—and it is for that very reason, that I answer: no, no, never!"

There could no longer be any doubt. M. d'Escorval seized Lacheneur's hands, and almost crushing them in his grasp:

"Unfortunate man!" he exclaimed, hoarsely, "what do you intend to do? Of what terrible vengeance are you dreaming?"

"I swear to you——"

"Oh! do not swear. You cannot deceive a man of my age and of my experience. I divine your intentions—you hate the Sairmeuse family more mortally than ever."

"I——"

"Yes, you; and if you pretend to forget it, it is only that they may forget it. These people have offended you too cruelly not to fear you; you understand this, and you are doing all in your power to reassure them. You accept their advances—you kneel before them—why? Because they will be more completely in your power when you have lulled their suspicions to rest, and then you can strike them more surely——"

He paused; the communicating door opened, and Marie-Anne appeared upon the threshold.

"Father," said she, "here is the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

This name, which Marie-Anne uttered in a voice of such perfect composure, in the midst of this excited discussion, possessed such a powerful significance, that M. d'Escorval stood as if petrified.

"He dares to come here!" he thought. "How can it be that he does not fear the walls will fall and crush him?"

M. Lacheneur cast a withering glance at his daughter. He suspected her of a ruse which would force him to reveal his secret. For a second, the most furious passion contracted his features.

But, by a prodigious effort of will, he succeeded in regaining his composure. He sprang to the door, pushed Marie-Anne aside, and leaning out, he said:

"Deign to excuse me, monsieur, if I take the liberty of asking you to wait a moment; I am just finishing some business, and I will be with you in a moment."

Neither agitation nor anger could be detected in his voice; but, rather, a respectful deference, and a feeling of profound gratitude.

Having said this, he closed the door and turned to M. d'Escorval.

The baron, still standing with folded arms, had witnessed this scene with the air of a man who distrusts the evidence of his own senses; and yet he understood the meaning of it only too well.

"So this young man comes here?" he said to Lacheneur.

"Almost every day—not at this hour, usually, but a trifle later."

"And you receive him? you welcome him?"

"Certainly, monsieur, How can I be insensible to the honor he confers upon me? Moreover, we have subjects of mutual interest to discuss. We are now occupied in legalizing the restitution of Sairmeuse. I can, also, give him much useful information, and many hints regarding the management of the property."

"And do you expect to make me, your old friend, believe that a man of your superior intelligence is deceived by the excuses the marquis makes for these frequent visits? Look me in the eye, and then tell me, if you dare, that you believe these visits are addressed to you!"

Lacheneur's eye did not waver.

"To whom else could they be addressed!" he inquired.

This obstinate serenity disappointed the baron's expectations. He could not have received a heavier blow.

"Take care, Lacheneur," he said, sternly. "Think of the situation in which you place your daughter, between Chanlouineau, who wishes to make her his wife, and M. de Sairmeuse, who desires to make her——"

"Who desires to make her his mistress—is that what you mean? Oh, say the word. But what does that matter? I am sure of Marie-Anne."

M. d'Escorval shuddered.

"In other words," said he, in bitter indignation, "you make your daughter's honor and reputation your stake in the game you are playing."

This was too much. Lacheneur could restrain his furious passion no longer.

"Well, yes!" he exclaimed, with a frightful oath; "yes, you have spoken the truth. Marie-Anne must be, and will be, the instrument of my plans. A man situated as I am is free from the considerations that restrain other men. Fortune, friends, life, honor—I have been forced to sacrifice all. Perish my daughter's virtue—perish my daughter herself—what do they matter, if I can but succeed?"

He was terrible in his fanaticism; and in his mad excitement he clinched his hands as if he were threatening some invisible enemy; his eyes were wild and blood-shot.

The baron seized him by the coat as if to prevent his escape.

"You admit it, then?" he said. "You wish to revenge yourself on the Sairmeuse family, and you have made Chanlouineau your accomplice?"

But Lacheneur with a sudden movement, freed himself.

"I admit nothing," he replied. "And yet I wish to reassure you——"

He raised his hand as if to take an oath, and in a solemn voice, he said:

"Before God, who hears my words, by all that I hold sacred in this world, by the memory of my sainted wife who lies beneath the sod, I swear that I am plotting nothing against the Sairmeuse family; that I had no thought of touching a hair of their heads. I use them only because they are absolutely indispensable to me. They will aid me without injuring themselves."

Lacheneur, this time, spoke the truth. His hearer felt it; still he pretended to doubt. He thought by retaining his own self-possession, and exciting the anger of this unfortunate man still more, he might, perhaps, discover his real intentions. So it was with an air of suspicion that he said:

"How can one believe this assurance after the avowal you have just made?"

Lacheneur saw the snare; he regained his self-possession as if by magic.

"So be it, monsieur, refuse to believe me. But you will wring from me only one more word on this subject. I have said too much already. I know that you are guided solely by friendship for me; my gratitude is great, but I cannot reply to your question. The events of the past few days have dug a deep abyss between you and me. Do not endeavor to pass it. Why should we ever meet again? I must say to you, what I said only yesterday to Abbe Midon. If you are my friend, you will never come here again—never—by night or by day, or under any pretext whatever. Even if they tell you that I am dying, do not come. This house is fatal. And if you meet me, turn away; shun me as you would a pestilence whose touch is deadly!"

The baron was silent. This was in substance what Marie-Anne had said to him, only under another form.

"But there is still a wiser course that you might pursue. Everything here is certain to augment the sorrow and despair which afflicts your son. There is not a path, nor a tree, nor a flower which does not cruelly remind him of his former happiness. Leave this place; take him with you, and go far away."

"Ah! how can I do this? Fouche has virtually imprisoned me here!"

"All the more reason why you should listen to my advice. You were a friend of the emperor, hence you are regarded with suspicion; you are surrounded by spies. Your enemies are watching for an opportunity to ruin you. The slightest pretext would suffice to throw you into prison—a letter, a word, an act capable of being misconstrued. The frontier is not far off; go, and wait in a foreign land for happier times."

"That is something which I will not do," said M. d'Escorval, proudly.

His words and accent showed the folly of further discussion. Lacheneur understood this only too well, and seemed to despair.

"Ah! you are like Abbe Midon," he said, sadly; "you will not believe. Who knows how much your coming here this morning will cost you? It is said that no one can escape his destiny. But if some day the hand of the executioner is laid upon your shoulder, remember that I warned you, and do not curse me."

He paused, and seeing that even this sinister prophecy produced no impression upon the baron, he pressed his hand as if to bid him an eternal farewell, and opened the door to admit the Marquis de Sairmeuse.

Martial was, perhaps, annoyed at meeting M. d'Escorval; but he nevertheless bowed with studied politeness, and began a lively conversation with M. Lacheneur,

telling him that the articles he had selected at the chateau were on their way.

M. d'Escorval could do no more. To speak with Marie-Anne was impossible: Chanlouineau and Jean would not let him go out of their sight.

He reluctantly departed, and oppressed by cruel forebodings, he descended the hill which he had climbed an hour before so full of hope.

What should he say to Maurice?

He had reached the little grove of pines when a hurried footstep behind him made him turn.

The Marquis de Sairmeuse was following him, and motioned him to stop. The baron paused, greatly surprised; Martial, with that air of ingenuousness which he knew so well how to assume, and in an almost brusque tone, said:

"I hope, monsieur, that you will excuse me for having followed you, when you hear what I have to say. I am not of your party; I loathe what you adore; but I have none of the passion nor the malice of your enemies. For this reason I tell you that if I were in your place I would take a journey. The frontier is but a few miles away: a good horse, a short gallop, and you have crossed it. A word to the wise is—salvation!"

And without waiting for any response, he turned and retraced his steps.

M. d'Escorval was amazed and confounded.

"One might suppose there was a conspiracy to drive me away!" he murmured. "But I have good reason to distrust the disinterestedness of this young man."

Martial was already far off. Had he been less preoccupied, he would have perceived two figures in the wood. Mlle. Blanche de Courtornieu, followed by the inevitable Aunt Medea, had come to play the spy.

CHAPTER LX.

THE Marquis de Courtornieu idolized his daughter. Every one spoke of that as an incostestable and uncontested fact.

When persons spoke to him of his daughter, they always said:

"You, who adore your daughter——"

And when he spoke of himself, *he* said:

"I who adore Blanche."

The truth was, that he would have given a good deal, even a third of his fortune, to be rid of her.

This smiling young girl, who seemed such an artless child, had gained an absolute control over him. She forced him to bow like a reed to her every caprice—and Heaven knows she had enough of them!

In the hope of making his escape, he had thrown her Aunt Medea; but in less than three months that poor woman had been completely subjugated, and did not serve to divert his daughter's attention from him, even for a moment.

Sometimes the marquis revolted, but nine times out of ten he paid dearly for his attempts at rebellion. When Mlle. Blanche turned her cold and steel-like eyes upon him with a certain peculiar expression, his courage evaporated. Her weapon was irony; and knowing his weak points she struck with wonderful precision.

It is easy to understand how devoutly he prayed and hoped that some honest young man, by speedily marrying his daughter, would free him from this cruel bondage.

But where was he to find this liberator?

The marquis had announced everywhere, his intention of bestowing a dowry of a million upon his daughter. Of course this had brought a host of eager suitors, not only from the immediate neighborhood, but from parts remote.

But, unfortunately, though many of them would have suited M. de Courtornieu well enough, not a single one had been so fortunate as to please Mlle. Blanche.

Her father presented some suitor; she received him graciously, lavished all her charms upon him; but as soon as his back was turned, she disappointed all her father's hopes by rejecting him.

"He is too small," she said, "or too large. His rank is not equal to ours. I think him stupid. He is a fool—his nose is so ugly."

From these summary decisions there was no appeal. Arguments and persuasions were useless. The condemned man no longer existed.

Still, as this view of aspirants to her hand amused her, she encouraged her father in his efforts. He was beginning to despair, when fate dropped the Duke de Sairmeuse and son at his very door. When he saw Martial, he had a presentiment of his approaching release.

"He will be my son-in-law," he thought.

The marquis believed it best to strike the iron while it was hot. So, the very next day, he broached the subject to the duke.

His overtures were favorably received.

Possessed with the desire of transforming Sairmeuse into a little principality, the duke could not fail to be delighted with an alliance with one of the oldest and wealthiest families in the neighborhood.

The conference was short.

"Martial, my son, possesses, in his own right, an income of at least six hundred thousand francs," said the duke.

"I shall give my daughter at least—yes, at least fifteen hundred thousand

francs as her marriage portion," declared the marquis.

"His majesty is favorably disposed towards me. I can obtain any important diplomatic position for Martial."

"In case of trouble, I have many friends among the opposition."

The treaty was thus concluded; but M. de Courtornieu took good care not to speak of it to his daughter. If he told her how much he desired the match, she would be sure to oppose it. Non-interference seemed advisable.

The correctness of his judgment was fully demonstrated. One morning Mlle. Blanche made her appearance in his cabinet.

"Your capricious daughter has decided, papa, that she would like to become the Marquise de Sairmeuse," said she, peremptorily.

It cost M. de Courtornieu quite an effort to conceal his delight; but he feared if she discovered his satisfaction that the game would be lost.

He presented several objections; they were quickly disposed of; and, at last, he ventured to say:

"Then the marriage is half decided; one of the parties consents. It only remains to ascertain if——"

"The other will consent," declared the vain heiress.

And, in fact, for several days Mlle. Blanche had been applying herself assidously and quite successfully to the work of fascination which was to bring Martial to her feet.

After having made an advance, with studied frankness and simplicity, sure of the effect she had produced, she now proceeded to beat a retreat—a manœuvre so simple that it was almost sure to succeed.

Until now she had been gay, *spirituelle* and coquettish; gradually, she became quiet and reserved. The giddy schoolgirl had given place to the shrinking virgin.

With what perfection she played her part in the divine comedy of first love! Martial could not fail to be fascinated by the modest artlessness and chaste fears of the heart which seemed to be waking for him. When he appeared, Mlle. Blanche blushed, and was silent. At a word from him she became confused. He could only occasionally catch a glimpse of her beautiful eyes through the shelter of their long lashes.

Who had taught her this refinement of coquetry? They say that the convent is an excellent teacher.

But what she had not learned was that the most clever often become the dupes of their own imagination; and that great *comediennes* generally conclude by shedding real tears.

She learned this one evening, when a laughing remark made by the Duke de Sairmeuse, revealed the fact that Martial was in the habit of going to Lacheneur's house every day.

What she experienced now could not be compared with the jealousy, or rather anger, which had previously agitated her.

This was an acute, bitter and intolerable sorrow. Before, she had been able to retain her composure; now, it was impossible.

That she might not betray herself, she left the drawing-room precipitately and hastened to her own room, where she burst into a fit of passionate sobbing.

"Can it be that he does not love me?" she murmured.

This thought made her cold with terror. For the first time this haughty heiress distrusted her own power.

She reflected that Martial's position was so exalted that he could afford to despise rank; that he was so rich that wealth had no attractions for him; and that she herself might not be so pretty and so charming as flatterers had led her to suppose.

Still Martial's conduct during the past week—and Heaven knows with what fidelity her memory recalled each incident!—was well calculated to reassure her.

He had not, it is true, formally declared himself; but it was evident that he was paying his addresses to her. His manner was that of the most respectful, but the most infatuated of lovers.

Her reflections were interrupted by the entrance of her maid, bringing a large bouquet of roses which had just been sent by Martial.

She took the flowers, and while arranging them in a large Japanese vase, she bedewed them with the first real sincere tears she had shed since her entrance into the world.

She was so pale and sad, so unlike herself when she appeared the next morning at breakfast, that Aunt Medea was alarmed.

Mlle. Blanche had prepared an excuse, and she uttered it in such sweet tones that the poor lady was as much amazed as if she had witnessed a miracle.

M. de Courtornieu was no less astonished.

"Of what new freak is this doleful face the preface?" he wondered.

He was still more alarmed when, immediately after breakfast, his daughter asked a moment's conversation with him.

She followed him into his study, and as soon as they were alone, without giving her father time to seat himself, Mlle. Blanche entreated him to tell her all that had passed between the Duke de Sairmeuse and himself, and asked if Martial had been informed of the intended alliance, and what he had replied.

Her voice was meek, her eyes tearful; her manner indicated the most intense anxiety.

The marquis was delighted.

"My willful daughter has been playing with fire," he thought, stroking his chin caressingly; "and upon my word, she has burned herself."

"Yesterday, my child," he replied, "the Duke de Sairmeuse formally demanded your hand on behalf of his son; your consent is all that is lacking. So rest easy, my beautiful, lovelorn damsel—you will be a duchess."

She hid her face in her hands to conceal her blushes.

"You know my decision, father," she faltered, in an almost inaudible voice—"we must make haste."

He started back, thinking he had not heard her words aright.

"Make haste!" he repeated.

"Yes, father. I have fears."

"What fears, in Heaven's name?"

"I will tell you when everything is settled," she replied, as she made her escape from the room.

She did not doubt the reports which had reached her ears, of Martial's frequent visits to Marie-Anne, but she wished to see for herself.

So, as soon as she left her father, she obliged Aunt Medea to dress herself, and without vouchsafing a single word of explanation, took her with her to the Reche, and stationed herself where she could command a view of M. Lacheneur's house.

It chanced to be the very day on which M. d'Escorval came to ask an explanation from his friend. She saw him come; then, after a little, Martial made his appearance.

She had not been mistaken—now she could go home satisfied.

But no. She resolved to count the seconds which Martial passed with Marie-Anne.

M. d'Escorval did not remain long; she saw Martial hasten out after him, and speak to him.

She breathed again. His visit had not lasted a half hour, and doubtless he was going away. Not at all. After a moment's conversation with the baron, he returned to the house.

"What are we doing here?" demanded Aunt Medea.

"Let me alone!" replied Mlle. Blanche, angrily; "hold your tongue!"

She heard the sound of wheels, the tramp of horses' hoofs, blows of the whip, and oaths.

The wagons bearing the furniture and clothing belonging to M. Lacheneur were coming.

This noise Martial must have heard within the house, for he came out, and after him came M. Lacheneur, Jean, Chanlouineau and Marie-Anne.

Every one was soon busy in unloading the wagons, and positively, from the movements of the young Marquis de Sairmeuse, one would have sworn that he was giving orders; he came and went, hurrying to and fro, talking to everybody, not even disdaining to lend a hand occasionally.

"He, a nobleman, makes himself at home in that wretched hovel!" Mlle. Blanche said to herself. "How horrible! Ah! this dangerous creature will do with him whatever she desires."

All this was nothing compared with what was to come. A third wagon appeared, drawn by a single horse, and laden with pots of flowers and shrubs.

This sight drew a cry of rage from Mlle. de Courtornieu which must have carried terror to Aunt Medea's heart.

"Flowers!" she exclaimed, in a voice hoarse with passion. "He sends flowers to her, as he does to me—only he sends me a bouquet, while for her he despoils the gardens of Sairmeuse."

"What are you saying about flowers?" inquired the impoverished relative.

Mlle. Blanche replied that she had not made the slightest allusion to flowers. She was suffocating—and yet she compelled herself to remain there three mortal hours—all the time that was required to unload the furniture.

The wagons had been gone some time, when Martial again appeared upon the threshold,

Marie-Anne had accompanied him to the door, and they were talking together. It seemed impossible for him to make up his mind to depart.

He did so, at last, however; but he left slowly and with evident reluctance. Marie-Anne, remaining in the door, gave him a friendly gesture of farewell.

"I wish to speak to this creature!" exclaimed Mlle. Blanche. "Come, aunt, at once!"

Had Marie-Anne, at that moment, been within the reach of Mlle. de Courtornieu's voice, she would certainly have learned the secret of her former friend's anger and hatred.

But fate willed it otherwise. At least three hundred yards of rough ground separated the place where Mlle. Blanche had stationed herself, from the Lacheneur cottage.

It required a moment to cross this space; and that was time enough to change all the girl's intentions.

She had not traversed a quarter of the distance before she bitterly regretted having shown herself at all. But to retrace her steps now was impossible, for Marie-Anne, who was still standing upon the threshold, had seen her approaching.

There remained barely time to regain

her self-control, and to compose her features. She profited by it.

She had her sweetest smile upon her lips as she greeted Marie-Anne. Still she was embarrassed; she did not know what excuse to give for her visit, and to gain time she pretended to be quite out of breath.

"Ah! it is not very easy to reach you, dear Marie-Anne," she said, at last; "you live upon the summit of a veritable mountain."

Mlle. Lacheneur said not a word. She was greatly surprised, and she did not attempt to conceal the fact.

"Aunt Medea pretended to know the road," continued Mlle. Blanche; "but she led me astray; did you not, aunt?"

As usual, the impecunious relative assented, and her niece resumed:

"But at last we are here. I could not, my dearest, resign myself to hearing nothing from you, especially after all your misfortunes. What have you been doing? Did my recommendation procure for you the work you desired?"

Marie-Anne could not fail to be deeply touched by this kindly interest on the part of her former friend. So, with perfect frankness, and without any false shame, she confessed that all her efforts had been fruitless. It had even seemed to her that several ladies had taken pleasure in treating her unkindly.

But Mlle. Blanche was not listening. A few steps from her stood the flowers brought from Sairmeuse; and their perfume rekindled her anger.

"At least," she interrupted, "you have here what will almost make you forget the gardens of Sairmeuse. Who sent you these beautiful flowers?"

Marie-Anne turned crimson. She did not speak for a moment, but at last she replied, or rather stammered:

"It is—an attention from the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

"So she confesses it!" thought Mlle. de Courtornieu, amazed at what she was pleased to consider an outrageous piece of impudence.

But she succeeded in concealing her rage beneath a loud burst of laughter; and it was in a tone of raillery that she said:

"Take care my dear friend; I am going to call you to account. It is from my *fiance* that you are accepting flowers."

"What, the Marquis de Sairmeuse!"

"Has demanded the hand of your friend. Yes, my darling; and my father has given it to him. It is a secret as yet; but I see no danger in confiding in your friendship."

She believed that she had inflicted a mortal wound upon Marie-Anne's heart; but though she watched her closely, she failed to detect the slightest trace of emotion upon her face.

"What dissimulation!" she thought. Then aloud, and with affected gayety, she resumed:

"And the country folks will see two weddings at about the same time, since you, also, are going to be married, my dear."

"I!"

"Yes, you—you little deceiver! Everybody knows that you are engaged to a young man in the neighborhood, named—wait—I know—Chanlouineau."

Thus the report that annoyed Marie-Anne so much reached her from every side.

"Everybody is for once mistaken," said she, energetically. "I shall never be that young man's wife."

"But why? They speak well of him, personally, and he is quite rich."

"Because," faltered Marie-Anne; "because——"

Maurice d'Escorval's name trembled upon her lips; but unfortunately she did not utter it, prevented by a strange expression on the face of her friend. How often one's destiny depends upon a circumstance apparently as trivial as this!

"Impudent, worthless creature!" thought Mlle. Blanche.

Then, in cold and sneering tones, that betrayed her hatred unmistakably, she said:

"You are wrong, believe me, to refuse this offer. This Chanlouineau will, at all events, save you from the painful necessity of laboring with your own hands, and of going from door to door in quest of work which is refused you. But, no matter; *I*"—she laid great stress upon this word—*I* will be more generous than your old acquaintances. I have a great deal of embroidery to be done. I shall send it to you by my maid, and you two may agree upon the price. We must go. Good-bye, my dear. Come, Aunt Medea."

She departed, leaving Marie-Anne petrified with surprise, sorrow, and indignation.

Although less experienced than Mlle. Blanche, she comprehended that this strange visit concealed some mystery—but what?

For more than a minute she stood motionless, gazing after her departing guests, then she started suddenly as a hand was laid gently upon her shoulder.

She trembled, and turning quickly, found herself face to face with her father.

Lacheneur's face was whiter than his linen, and a sinister light glittered in his eye.

"I was there," said he, pointing to the door, "and I heard all."

"Father!"

"What! would you try to defend her after she came here to crush you with

her insolent good fortune—after she overwhelmed you with her ironical pity and with her scorn! I tell you they are all like this—these girls, whose heads have been turned by flattery, and who believe that in their veins flows a different blood from ours. But patience! The day of reckoning is near at hand!"

Those whom he threatened would have shuddered had they seen him at that moment, so terrible was the rage revealed by his accent, so formidable did he appear.

"And you, my beloved daughter, my poor Marie-Anne, you did not understand the insults she heaped upon you. You are wondering why she should have treated you with such disdain. Ah, well! I will tell you: she imagines that the Marquis de Sairmeuse is your lover."

Marie-Anne tottered beneath the terrible blow, and a nervous spasm shook her from head to foot.

Can this be possible?" she exclaimed. "Great God! what shame! what humiliation!"

"And why should this astonish you?" said Lacheneur, coldly. "Have you not expected this ever since the day when you, my devoted daughter, consented, for the sake of my plans, to submit to the attentions of this marquis, whom you loathe as much as I despise?"

"But Maurice! Maurice will despise me! I can bear anything, yes, everything but that."

M. Laucheneur made no reply. Marie-Anne's despair was heart-breaking; he felt that he could not bear to witness it, that it would shake his resolution, and he re-entered the house.

But his penetration was not at fault. While waiting to find a revenge which would be worthy of her, Mlle. Blanche armed herself with a weapon of which jealousy and hatred so often avail themselves—calumny.

Two or three abominable stories which she concocted, and which she forced Aunt Medea to circulate everywhere, did not produce the desired effect.

Marie-Anne's reputation was, of course, ruined by them; but Martial's visits, instead of ceasing, became longer and more frequent. Dissatisfied with his progress, and fearful that he was being duped, he even watched the house.

So it happened that, one evening, when he was quite sure that Lacheneur, his son, and Chanlouineau were absent, Martial saw a man leave the house and hasten across the fields.

He rushed after him, but the man escaped him.

He believed, however, that he recognized Maurice d'Escorval.

CHAPTER LXI.

AFTER his son's confession, M. d'Escorval was prudent enough to make no allusion to the hopes he, himself, entertained.

"My poor Maurice," he thought, "is heart-broken, but resigned. It is better for him to remain without hope than to be exposed to the danger of another disappointment."

But passion is not always blind. What the baron concealed, Maurice divined; and he clung to this faint hope as tenaciously as a drowning man clings to the plank which is his only hope of salvation.

If he asked his parents no questions it was only because he was convinced that they would not tell him the truth.

But he watched all that went on in the house with that subtleness of penetration which fever so often imparts.

Not one of his father's movements escaped his vigilant eye and ear.

Consequently he heard him put on his boots, ask for his hat, and select a cane from among those standing in the vestibule. He also heard the outer gate grate upon its hinges.

"My father is going out," he said, to himself.

And weak as he was, he succeeded in dragging himself to the window in time to satisfy himself of the truth of his conjectures.

"If my father is going out," he thought, "it can only be to visit M. Lacheneur—then he has not relinquished all hope."

An arm-chair was standing near by; he sank into it, intending to watch for his father's return; by doing so, he might know his destiny a few moments sooner.

Three long hours passed before the baron returned.

By his father's dejected manner he plainly saw that all hope was lost. He was sure of it; as sure as the criminal who reads the fatal verdict in the solemn face of the judge.

He had need of all his energy to regain his couch. For a moment he felt that he was dying.

But he was ashamed of this weakness, which he judged unworthy of him. He determined to know what had passed—to know the details.

He rang, and told the servant that he wished to speak to his father. M. d'Escorval promptly made his appearance.

"Well?" cried Maurice.

M. d'Escorval felt that denial was useless.

"Lacheneur is deaf to my remonstrances and to my entreaties," he replied, sadly. "Nothing remains for you

but to submit, my son. I shall not tell you that time will assuage the sorrow that now seems insupportable—you would not believe me. But I do say to you, that you are a man, and that you must prove your courage. I say even more: fight against thoughts of Marie-Anne as a traveler on the verge of a precipice fights against the thought of vertigo."

"Have you seen Marie-Anne, father? Have you spoken to her?"

"I found her even more inflexible than Lacheneur."

"They reject me, and they receive Chanlouineau, perhaps."

"Chanlouineau is living there."

"My God! And Martial de Sairmeuse?"

"He is their familiar guest. I saw him there."

That each of these responses fell upon Maurice like a thunderbolt, was only too evident.

But M. d'Escorval had armed himself with the impassable courage of a surgeon who does not relax his hold on his instruments because the patient groans and writhes in agony.

M. d'Escorval wished to extinguish the last ray of hope in the heart of his son.

"It is evident that M. Lacheneur has lost his reason!" exclaimed Maurice.

The baron shook his head despondently.

"I thought so myself, at first," he murmured.

"But what does he say in justification of his conduct? He must say something."

"Nothing: he refuses any explanation."

"And you, father, with all your knowledge of human nature, with all your wide experience, have not been able to fathom his intentions?"

"I have my suspicions," M. d'Escorval replied; "but only suspicions. It is possible that Lacheneur, listening to the voice of hatred, is dreaming of a terrible revenge. Who knows if he does not think of organizing some conspiracy, of which he is to be the leader? These suppositions would explain everything. Chanlouineau is his aider and abettor; and he pretends to be reconciled to the Marquis de Sairmeuse in order to get information through him——"

The blood had returned to the pale cheeks of Maurice.

"Such a conspiracy would not explain M. Lacheneur's obstinate rejection of my suit."

"Alas! yes, my poor boy. It is through Marie-Anne that Lacheneur exerts such an influence over Chanlouineau and the Marquis de Sairmeuse. If she became your wife to-day, they would desert him to-morrow. Then, too, it is precisely because he loves us that he is determined we shall not be mixed up in an enterprise the success of which is extremely doubtful. But these are mere conjectures."

"Then, I see that it is necessary to submit, to be resigned; forget, I cannot," faltered Maurice.

He said this because he wished to reassure his father; but he thought exactly the opposite.

"If Lacheneur is organizing a conspiracy," he said, to himself, "he must need assistance. Why should I not offer mine? If I aid him in his preparations, if I share his hopes and his dangers, it will be impossible for him to refuse me the hand of his daughter. Whatever he may desire to undertake, I can surely be of greater assistance than Chanlouineau."

From that moment Maurice thought only of doing everything possible to hasten his convalescence. This was so rapid, so extraordinarily rapid, as to astonish Abbe Midon, who had taken the place of the physician from Montaignac.

"I never would have believed that Maurice could have been thus consoled," said Madame d'Escorval, delighted to see her son's wonderful improvement in health and spirits.

But the baron made no response. He regarded this almost miraculous recovery with distrust, he was assailed by a vague suspicion of the truth.

He questioned his son, but skillfully as he did it, he could draw nothing from him.

Maurice had decided to say nothing to his parents. What good would it do to trouble them? Besides, he feared remonstrance and opposition and he was resolved to carry out his plans, even if he was compelled to leave the paternal roof.

In the second week of September the abbe declared that Maurice might resume his ordinary life, and that, as the weather was pleasant, it would be well for him to spend much of his time in the open air.

In his delight, Maurice embraced the worthy priest."

"What happiness!" he exclaimed: "then I can hunt once more!"

He really cared but little for the chase; but he deemed it expedient to pretend a great passion for it, since it would furnish him with an excuse for frequent and protracted absences.

Never had he felt more happy than on the morning when, with his gun upon his shoulder, he crossed the Oiselle and started for the abode of M. Lacheneur. On reaching the little grove on the Reche, he paused for a moment at a place which commanded a view of the cottage. While he stood there, he saw Jean Lacheneur and Chanlouineau leave the house, each laden with a pedler's pack.

Maurice was therefore sure that M. Lacheneur and Marie-Anne were alone in the house.

He hastened to the cottage and entered without stopping to rap.

Marie-Anne and her father were kneeling on the hearth, upon which a huge fire was blazing.

On hearing the door open, they turned; and at the sight of Maurice, they both sprang up, blushed and confused.

"What brings you here?" they exclaimed in the same breath.

Under other circumstances, Maurice d'Escorval would have been dismayed by such a hostile greeting, but now he scarcely noticed it.

"You have no business to return here against my wishes, and after what I have said to you, Monsieur d'Escorval," said Lacheneur, rudely.

Maurice smiled, he was perfectly cool, and not a detail of the scene before him had escaped his notice. If he had felt any doubts before, they were now dissipated. He saw upon the fire a large kettle of melted lead, and several bullet-molds stood on the hearth, beside the andirons.

"If I venture to present myself at your house, monsieur," said Maurice gravely and impressively, "it is because I know all. I have discovered your revengeful project. You are looking for men to aid you, are you not? Very well! look me in the face, in the eyes, and tell me if I am not one of those whom a leader is glad to enroll among his followers?"

M. Lacheneur was terribly agitated.

"I do not know what you mean," he faltered, forgetting his feigned anger; "I have no projects."

"Would you assert this upon oath? why are you casting these bullets? You are clumsy conspirators. You should lock your door; some one else might have entered."

And adding example to precept, he turned and pushed the bolt.

"This is only an imprudence," he continued: "but to reject a soldier who comes to you voluntarily would be a fault for which your associate would have a right to call you to account. I have no desire, understand me, to force myself into your confidence. No, I give myself to you blindly, body and soul. Whatever your cause may be, I declare it mine; what you wish, I wish; I adopt your plans; your enemies are my enemies; command, I will obey. I ask only one favor, that of fighting, of triumphing, or of dying by your side."

"Oh! refuse, father!" exclaimed Marie-Anne, "refuse. To accept this offer would be a crime!"

"A crime! And why, if you please?"

"Because our cause is not your cause; because its success is doubtful; because dangers surround us on every side."

A scornful exclamation from Maurice interrupted her.

"And it is you who think to dissuade me by pointing out the dangers that threaten you, the dangers that you are braving——"

"Maurice!"

"So if imminent peril menaced me, instead of coming to my aid you would desert me? You would hide yourself, saying, 'Let him perish, so that I be saved!' Speak! would you do this?"

She averted her face and made no reply. She could not force herself to utter an untruth; and she was unwilling to answer: "I would act as you are acting." She waited for her father's decision.

"If I should comply with your request, Maurice," said M. Lacheneur, "in less than three days you would curse me, and ruin us by some outburst of anger. You love Marie-Anne. Could you see, unmoved, the frightful position in which she is placed? Remember, she must not discourage the addresses either of Chanlouineau or of the Marquis de Sairmeuse. You regard me—Oh! I know as well as you do that it is a shameful and odious role that I impose upon her—that she is compelled to play a part in which she will lose a young girl's most precious possession—her reputation."

Maurice did not wince. "So be it," he said, calmly. "Marie-Anne's fate will be that of all women who have devoted themselves to the political advancement of the man whom they love, be he father, brother, or lover. She will be slandered, insulted, calumniated. What does it matter! She may continue her task. I consent to it, for I shall never doubt her, and I shall know how to hold my peace. If we succeed, she shall be my wife, if we fail——"

The gesture which concluded the sentence said more strongly than any protestations that he was ready, resigned to anything.

M. Lacheneur was greatly moved.

"At least give me time for reflection," said he.

"There is no necessity for further reflection, monsieur."

"But you are only a child, Maurice; and your father is my friend."

"What of that?"

"Rash boy! do you not understand that by compromising yourself you also compromise Baron d'Escorval? You think you are risking only your own head; you are endangering your father's life——"

But Maurice violently interrupted him.

"There has been too much parleying already!" he exclaimed; "there have been too many remonstrances. Answer me in a word! Only understand this: if

you reject me, I will return to my father's house, and with this gun which I hold in my hand I will blow out my brains."

This was no idle threat. It was evident that what he said, that would he do. His listeners were so convinced of this, that Marie-Anne turned to her father with clasped hands and a look of entreaty.

"You are one of us, then," said M. Lacheneur, sternly; "but do not forget that you forced me to consent by threats; and whatever may happen to you or yours, remember that you would have it so."

But these gloomy words produced no impression upon Maurice; he was wild with joy.

"Now," continued M. Lacheneur, "I must tell you my hopes, and acquaint you with the cause for which I am laboring——"

"What does that matter to me?" Maurice exclaimed, gayly; and springing toward Marie-Anne, he seized her hand and raised it to his lips, crying, with the joyous laugh of youth:

"My cause—here it is!"

Lacheneur turned away. Perhaps he recollected that a sacrifice of his pride was all that was necessary to assure the happiness of these poor children.

But if a feeling of remorse entered his mind, he drove it away, and with increased sternness, he said:

"Still, Monsieur d'Escorval, it is necessary for you to understand our agreement."

"Make known your conditions, sir."

"First, your visits here—after certain rumors that I have put in circulation—would arouse suspicion. You must come here only at night, and then only at hours that have been agreed upon in advance—never when you are not expected."

The attitude of Maurice expressed his entire consent.

"Moreover, you must find some way to cross the river without having recourse to the ferryman, who is a dangerous fellow."

"We have an old skiff: I will persuade my father to have it repaired."

"Very well. Will you also promise me to avoid the Marquis de Sairmeuse?"

"I will."

"Wait a moment—we must be prepared for any emergency. It may be that in spite of our precautions you will meet him here. M. de Sairmeuse is arrogance itself: and he hates you. You detest him, and you are very hasty. Swear to me that if he provokes you, you will ignore his insults."

"But I should be considered a coward, monsieur."

"Probably. Will you swear?"

Maurice hesitated, but an imploring look from Marie-Ann decided him.

"I swear!" he said, gravely.

"As far as Chanlouineau is concerned, it would be better not to let him know of our agreement—but I will take care of this matter."

M. Lacheneur paused and reflected for a moment as if striving to discover if he had forgotten anything.

"Nothing remains, Maurice," he resumed, "but to give you a last and very important piece of advice. Do you know my son?"

"Certainly; we were formerly the best of comrades during our vacations."

"Very well. When you know my secret—for I shall confide it to you without reserve—beware of Jean."

"What, sir?"

"Beware of Jean. I repeat it."

And he blushed deeply, as he added:

"Ah! it is a painful avowal for a father; but I have no confidence in my own son. He knows no more in regard to my plans than I told him on the day of his arrival. I deceive him, because I fear he might betray us. Perhaps it would be wise to send him away; but in that case, what would people say? Most assuredly they would say that I was very avaricious of my own blood, while I was very ready to risk the lives of others. Still I may be mistaken; I may misjudge him."

He sighed, and added:

"Beware!"

CHAPTER LXII.

So it was really Maurice d'Escorval whom the Marquis de Sairmeuse had seen leaving Lacheneur's house.

Martial was not certain of it, but the very possibility made his heart swell with anger.

"What part am I playing here, then?" he exclaimed, indignantly.

He had been so completely blinded by passion that he would not have been likely to discover the real condition of affairs even if no pains had been taken to deceive him.

Lacheneur's formal courtesy and politeness he regarded as sincere. He believed in the studied respect shown him by Jean; and the almost servile obsequiousness of Chanlouineau did not surprise him in the least.

And since Marie-Anne welcomed him politely, he concluded that his suit was progressing favorably.

Having himself forgotten, he supposed that every one else had ceased to remember.

Moreover, he was of the opinion that he had acted with great generosity, and that he was entitled to the deep gratitude of the Lacheneur family; for M.

Lacheneur had received the legacy bequeathed him by Mlle. Armande, and an indemnity, besides all the furniture he had chosen to take from the chateau, a total of at least sixty thousand francs.

"He must be hard to please, if he is not satisfied!" growled the duke, enraged at such prodigality, though it did not cost him a penny.

Martial had supposed himself the only visitor at the cottage on the Reche; and when he discovered that such was not the case, he became furious.

"Am I, then, the dupe of a shameless girl?" he thought.

He was so incensed, that for more than a week he did not go to Lacheneur's house.

His father concluded that his ill humor and gloom was caused by some misunderstanding with Marie-Anne; and he took advantage of this opportunity to gain his son's consent to an alliance with Blanche de Courtornieu.

A victim to the most cruel doubts and fears, Martial, goaded to the last extremity, exclaimed:

"Very well! I will marry Mademoiselle Blanche."

The duke did not allow such a good resolution to grow cold.

In less than forty-eight hours the engagement was made public; the marriage contract was drawn up, and it was announced that the wedding would take place early in the spring.

A grand banquet was given at Sairmeuse in honor of the betrothal—a banquet all the more brilliant since there were other victories to be celebrated.

The Duke de Sairmeuse had just received, with his brevet of lieutenant-general, a commission placing him in command of the military department of Montaignac.

The Marquis de Courtornieu had also received an appointment, making him provost-martial of the same district.

Blanche had triumphed. After this public betrothal, Martial was bound to her.

For a fortnight, indeed, he scarcely left her side. In her society there was a charm whose sweetness almost made him forget his love for Marie-Anne.

But unfortunately the haughty heiress could not resist the temptation to make a slighting allusion to Marie-Anne, and to the lowliness of the marquis's former tastes. She found an opportunity to say that she furnished Marie-Anne with work to aid her in earning a living.

Martial forced himself to smile; but the indignity which Marie-Anne had received aroused his sympathy and indignation.

And the next day he went to Lacheneur's house.

In the warmth of the greeting that awaited him there, all his anger vanished, all his suspicions evaporated. Marie-Anne's eyes beamed with joy on seeing him again; he noticed it.

"Oh! I shall win her yet!" he thought.

All the household were really delighted at his return; the son of the commander of the military forces at Montaignac, and the prospective son-in-law of the provost-marshal, Martial was a most valuable instrument.

"Through him, we shall have an eye and an ear in the enemy's camp," said Lacheneur. "The Marquis de Sairmeuse will be our spy."

He was, for he soon resumed his daily visits to the cottage. It was now December, and the roads were terrible; but neither rain, snow, nor mud could keep Martial from the cottage.

He made his appearance generally as early as ten o'clock, seated himself upon a stool in the shadow of a tall fire-place, and he and Marie-Anne talked by the hour.

She seemed greatly interested in matters at Montaignac, and he told her all that he knew in regard to affairs there.

Sometimes they were alone.

Lacheneur, Chanlouineau, and Jean were tramping about the country with their merchandise. Business was prospering so well that M. Lacheneur had purchased a horse in order to extend his journies.

But Martial's conversation was generally interrupted by visitors. It was really surprising to see how many peasants came to the house to speak to M. Lacheneur. There was an interminable procession of them. And to each of these peasants Marie-Anne had something to say in private. Then she offered each man refreshments — the house seemed almost like a common drinking saloon.

But what can daunt the courage of a lover? Martial endured all this without a murmur. He laughed and jested with the comers and goers; he shook hands with them; sometimes he even drank with them.

He gave many other proofs of moral courage. He offered to assist M. Lacheneur in making up his acounts; and once —it happened about the middle of February—seeing Chanlouineau worrying over the composition of a letter, he actually offered to act as his amanuensis.

"The d——d letter is not for me, but for an uncle of mine who is about to marry off his daughter," said Chanlouineau.

Martial took a seat at the table, and, at Chanlouineau's dictation, but not without many erasures, indited the following epistle:

"My Dear Friend—We are at last agreed, and the marriage has been de-

cided upon. We are now busy with preparations for the wedding, which will take place on ———. We invite you to give us the pleasure of your company. We count upon you, and be assured that the more friends you bring with you the better we shall be pleased."

Had Martial seen the smile upon Chanlouineau's lips when he requested him to leave the date for the wedding a blank, he would certainly have suspected that he had been caught in a snare. But he was in love.

"Ah! marquis," remarked his father one day, "Chupin tells me you are always at Lacheneur's. When will you recover from your *penchant* for that little girl?"

Martial did not reply. He felt that he was at that "little girl's" mercy. Each glance of hers made his heart throb wildly. By her side he was a willing captive. If she had asked him to make her his wife he would not have said no.

But Marie-Anne had not this ambition. All her thoughts, all her wishes were for her father's success.

Maurice and Marie-Anne had become M. Lacheneur's most intrepid auxiliaries. They were looking forward to such a magnificent reward.

Such feverish activity as Maurice displayed! All day long he hurried from hamlet to hamlet, and in the evening, as soon as dinner was over, he made his escape from the drawing-room, sprang into his boat, and hastened to the Reche.

M. d'Escorval could not fail to remark the long and frequent absences of his son. He watched him, and soon became absolutely certain that Lacheneur had, to use the baron's own expression, seduced him.

Greatly alarmed, he decided to go and see his former friend, and fearing another repulse, he begged Abbe Midon to accompany him.

It was on the fourth of March, at about half-past four o'clock, that M. d'Escorval and the *cure* started for the Reche. They were so anxious and troubled in mind that they scarcely exchanged a dozen words as they wended their way onward.

A strange sight met their eyes as they emerged from the grove on the Reche.

Night was falling, but it was still light enough for them to distinguish objects only a short distance from them.

Before Lacheneur's house stood a group of about a dozen persons, and M. Lacheneur was speaking and gesticulating excitedly.

What was he saying? Neither the baron nor the priest could distinguish his words, but when he ceased, the most vociferous acclamations rent the air.

Suddenly a match glowed between his fingers; he set fire to a bundle of straw and tossed it upon the thatched roof of his cottage, crying out in a terrible voice:

"The die is cast! This will prove to you that I shall not draw back!"

Five minutes later the house was in flames.

In the distance the baron and his companion saw the windows of the citadel at Montaignac illuminated by a red glare, and upon every hillside glowed the light of other incendiary fires.

The country was responding to Lacheneur's signal.

CHAPTER LXIII.

Ah! ambition is a fine thing!

The Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu were past middle-age; their lives had been marked by many storms and vicissitudes; they were the possessors of millions, and the owners of the most sumptuous residences in the province. Under these circumstances one might have supposed that they would desire to end their days in peace and quietness.

It would have been easy for them to create a life of happiness by doing good to those around them, and by preparing for their last hours a chorus of benedictions and of regrets.

But no. They longed to have a hand in managing the ship of state; they were not content to be simply passengers.

And the duke, appointed to the command of the military forces, and the marquis, made presiding judge of the court at Montaignac, were both obliged to leave their beautiful homes and take up their abode in rather dingy quarters in town.

They did not murmur at the change; their vanity was satisfied.

Louis XVIII. was on the throne; their prejudices were triumphant; they were happy.

It is true that dissatisfaction was rife on every side, but had they not hundreds and thousands of allies at hand to suppress it?

And when wise and thoughtful persons spoke of "discontent," the duke and his associates regarded them as visionaries.

On the 4th of March, 1816, the duke was just sitting down to dinner when a loud noise was heard in the vestibule.

He rose—but at that very instant the door was flung open and a man entered, panting and breathless.

This man was Chupin, the former poacher, whom M. de Sairmeuse had elevated to the position of head gamekeeper.

It was evident that something extraordinary had happened.

"What is it?" inquired the duke.

"They are coming!" cried Chupin; "they are already on the way!"

"Who? who?"

By way of response, Chupin handed the duke a copy of the letter written by Martial under Chanlouineau's dictation.

M. de Sairmeuse read:

"My Dear Friend—We are at last agreed, and the marriage is decided. We are now busy in preparing for the wedding, which will take place on the fourth of March."

The date was no longer blank; but still the duke did not comprehend.

"Well, what of it?" he demanded.

Chupin tore his hair.

"They are on the way," he repeated. "I speak of the peasants—they intend to take possession of Montaignac, dethrone Louis XVIII., bring back the emperor, or, at least, the son of the emperor—miserable wretches! they have deceived me. I suspected this outbreak, but I did not think it was so near at hand."

This terrible blow, so entirely unexpected, stupefied the duke for a moment.

"How many are there?" he demanded.

"Ah! how do I know, monsieur? Two thousand, perhaps—perhaps ten thousand."

"All the towns-people are with us."

"No, monsieur, no. The rebels have accomplices here. All the retired officers stand ready to assist them."

"Who are the leaders of the movement?"

"Lacheneur, Abbe Midon, Chanlouineau, Baron d'Escorval——"

"Enough!" cried the duke.

Now that danger was certain, his coolness returned; and his herculean form, a trifle bowed by the weight of years, rose to its full height.

He gave the bell-rope a violent pull; a valet appeared.

"My uniform," commanded M. de Sairmeuse; "my pistols! Quick!"

The servant was about to obey, when the duke exclaimed:

"Wait! Let some one take a horse, and go and tell my son to come here without a moment's delay. Take one of the swiftest horses. The messenger ought to go to Sairmeuse and return in two hours."

Chupin endeavored to attract the duke's attention by pulling the skirt of his coat. M. de Sairmeuse turned:

"What is it?"

The old poacher put his finger on his lip, recommending silence, but as soon as the valet had left the room, he said:

"It is useless to send for the marquis?"

"And why, you fool?"

"Because, monsieur, because—excuse me—I——"

"Zounds! will you speak, or will you not?"

Chupin regretted that he had gone so far.

"Because the marquis——"

"Well?"

"He is engaged in it."

The duke overturned the table with a terrible blow of his clenched fist.

"You lie, wretch!" he thundered, with the most horrible oaths.

He was so formidable in his anger that the old poacher sprang to the door and turned the knob, ready to take flight.

"May I lose my head if I do not speak the truth," he insisted. "Ah! Lacheneur's daughter is a regular sorceress. All the gallants of the neighborhood are in the ranks; Chanlouineau, young D'Escorval, your son——"

M. de Sairmeuse was pouring forth a torrent of curses upon Marie-Anne when his valet re-entered the room.

He suddenly checked himself, put on his uniform, and ordering Chupin to follow him, hastened from the house.

He was still hoping that Chupin had exaggerated the danger; but when he reached the Place d'Arms, which commanded an extended view of the surrounding country, his illusions were put to flight.

Signal lights gleamed upon every side. Montaignac seemed surrounded by a circle of flame.

"These are the signals," murmured Chupin. "The rebels will be here before two o'clock in the morning."

The duke made no response but hastened to consult M. de Courtornieu.

He was striding towards his friend's house when, on hastily turning a corner, he saw two men talking in a doorway, and on seeing the glittering of the duke's epaulettes, both of them took flight.

The duke instinctively started in pursuit, overtook one man, and seizing him by the collar, he asked, sternly:

"Who are you? What is your name?"

The man was silent, and his captor shook him so roughly that two pistols, which had been hidden under his long coat, fell to the ground.

"Ah, brigand!" exclaimed M. de Sairmeuse, "so you are one of the conspirators against the king!"

Then, without another word, he dragged the man to the citadel, gave him in charge of the astonished soldiers, and again started for M. de Courtornieu's house.

He expected the marquis would be terrified; not in the least; he seemed delighted.

"At last there comes an opportunity for us to display our devotion and our zeal—and without danger! We have good walls, strong gates, and three thousand soldiers at our command. These peasants are fools! But be grateful for their folly, my dear duke, and run and order out the Montaignac chasseurs——"

But suddenly a cloud overspread his face; he knit his brows, and added:

"The devil! I am expecting Blanche this evening. She was to leave Courtornieu after dinner. Heaven grant that she may meet with no misfortune on the way!"

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu had more time before them than they supposed.

The rebels were advancing, but not so rapidly as Chupin had said.

Two circumstances, which it was impossible to foresee, disarranged Lacheneur's plans.

Standing beside his burning house, Lacheneur counted the signal fires that blazed out in answer to his own.

Their number corresponded to his expectations; he uttered a cry of joy.

"All our friends keep their word!" he exclaimed. "They are ready; they are even now on their way to the rendezvous. Let us start at once, for we must be there first!"

They brought him his horse, and his foot was already in the stirrup, when two men sprang from the neighboring grove and darted towards him. One of them seized the horse by the bridle.

"Abbe Midon!" exclaimed Lacheneur, in profound astonishment; "M. d'Escorval!"

And foreseeing, perhaps, what was to come, he added, in a tone of concentrated fury:

"What do you two men want with me?"

"We wish to prevent the accomplishment of an act of madness!" exclaimed M. d'Escorval. "Hatred has crazed you, Lacheneur!"

"You know nothing of my projects!"

"Do you think that I do not suspect them? You hope to capture Montaignac——"

"What does that matter to you?" interrupted Lacheneur, violently.

But M. d'Escorval would not be silenced.

He seized the arm of his former friend, and in a voice loud enough to be heard distinctly by every one present, he continued:

"Foolish man! You have forgotten that Montaignac is a fortified city, protected by deep moats and high walls! You have forgotten that behind these fortifications is a garrison commanded by a man whose energy and valor are beyond all question—the Duke de Sairmeuse."

Lacheneur struggled to free himself from his friend's grasp.

"Everything has been arranged," he replied, "and they are expecting us at Montaignac. You would be as sure of this as I am myself, if you had seen the light gleaming on the windows of the citadel. And look, you can see it yet. This light tells me that two or three hundred retired officers will come to open the gates of the city for us as soon as we make our appearance."

"And after that! If you take Montaignac, what will you do then? Do you suppose that the English will give you back your Emperor? Is not Napoleon II. the prisoner of the Austrians. Have you forgotten that the allied sovereigns have left one hundred and fifty thousand soldiers within a day's march of Paris?"

Sullen murmurs were heard among Lacheneur's followers.

"But all this is nothing," continued the baron. "The chief danger lies in the fact that there are as many traitors as dupes in an undertaking of this sort."

"Whom do you call dupes, monsieur?"

"All those who take their illusions for realities, as you have done; all those who, because they desire anything very much, really believe that it will come to pass. Do you really suppose that neither the Duke de Sairmeuse nor the Marquis de Courtornieu has been warned of it?"

Lacheneur shrugged his shoulders.

"Who could have warned them?"

But his tranquillity was feigned; the look which he cast upon Jean proved it.

And it was in the coldest possible tone that he added:

"It is probable that at this very hour the duke and the marquis are in the power of our friends."

The *cure* now attempted to join his efforts to those of the baron.

"You will not go, Lacheneur," he said. "You will not remain deaf to the voice of reason. You are an honest man; think of the frightful responsibility you assume! What! upon these frail hopes, you dare to peril the lives of hundreds of brave men? I tell you that you will not succeed; you will be betrayed; I am sure you will be betrayed!"

An expression of horror contracted Lacheneur's features. It was evident to all that he was deeply moved.

It is impossible to say what might have happened had it not been for the intervention of Chanlouineau.

This sturdy peasant came forward, brandishing his gun.

"We are wasting too much time in foolish prattling," he exclaimed with a fierce oath.

Lacheneur started as if he had been struck by a whip. He rudely freed himself and leaped into the saddle.

"Forward!" he ordered.

But the baron and the priest did not yet despair; they sprang to the horse's head.

"Lacheneur," cried the priest, "beware! The blood you are about to spill will fall upon your head, and upon the heads of your children!"

Appalled by these prophetic words, the little band paused.

Then some one issued from the ranks, clad in the costume of a peasant.

"Marie-Anne!" exclaimed the abbe and the baron in the same breath.

"Yes, I," responded the young girl, removing the large hat which had partially concealed her face; "I wish to share the dangers of those who are dear to me—share in their victory or their defeat. Your counsel comes too late, gentlemen. Do you see those lights on the horizon? They tell us that the people of these communes are repairing to the cross-roads at the Croix d'Arcy, the general rendezvous. Before two o'clock fifteen hundred men will be gathered there awaiting my father's commands. Would you have him leave these men, whom he has called from their peaceful firesides, without a leader? Impossible!"

She evidently shared the madness of her lover and father, even if she did not share all their hopes.

"No, there must be no more hesitation, no more parleying," she continued. "Prudence now would be the height of folly. There is no more danger in a retreat than in an advance. Do not try to detain my father, gentlemen; each moment of delay may, perhaps, cost a man's life. And now, my friends, forward!"

A loud cheer answered her, and the little band descended the hill.

But M. d'Escorval could not allow his own son, whom he saw in the ranks, to depart thus.

"Maurice!" he cried.

The young man hesitated, but at last approached.

"You will not follow these madmen, Maurice?" said the baron.

"I must follow them, father."

"I forbid it."

"Alas! father, I cannot obey you. I have promised—I have sworn. I am second in command."

His voice was sad, but it was determined.

"My son!" exclaimed M. d'Escorval; "unfortunate child!—it is to certain death that you are marching—to certain death."

"All the more reason that I should not break my word, father."

"And your mother, Maurice, the mother whom you forget!"

A tear glistened in the young man's eye.

"My mother," he replied, "would rather weep for her dead son than keep him near her dishonored, and branded with the names of coward and traitor. Farewell! my father."

M. d'Escorval appreciated the nobility of soul that Maurice displayed in his conduct. He extended his arms, and pressed his beloved son convulsively to his heart, feeling that it might be for the last time.

"Farewell!" he faltered, "Farewell!"

Maurice soon rejoined his comrades, whose acclamations were growing fainter and fainter in the distance; but the baron stood motionless, overwhelmed with sorrow.

Suddenly he started from his reverie.

"A single hope remains, Abbe!" he cried.

"Alas!" murmured the priest.

"Oh—I am not mistaken. Marie-Anne just told us the place of rendezvous. By running to Escorval and harnessing the cabriolet, we might be able to reach the Croix d'Arcy before this party arrive there. Your voice, which touched Lacheneur, will touch the heart of his accomplices. We will persuade these poor, misguided men to return to their homes. Come, abbe; come quickly!"

And they departed on the run.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE clock in the tower of Sairmeuse was striking the hour of eight when Lacheneur and his little band of followers left the Reche.

An hour later, at the Chateau de Courtornieu, Mlle. Blanche, after finishing her dinner, ordered the carriage to convey her to Montaignac. Since her father had taken up his abode in town they met only on Sunday; on that day either Blanche went to Montaignac, or the marquis paid a visit to the chateau.

Hence this proposed journey was a deviation from the regular order of things. It was explained, however, by grave circumstances,

It was six days since Martial had presented himself at Courtornieu; and Blanche was half crazed with grief and rage.

What Aunt Medea was forced to endure during this interval, only poor dependents in rich families can understand.

For the first three days Mlle. Blanche succeeded in preserving a semblance of self-control; on the fourth she could endure it no longer, and in spite of the breach of "*les convenances*" which it involved, she sent a messenger to Sairmeuse to inquire for Martial. Was he ill—had he gone away?

The messenger was informed that the marquis was perfectly well, but, as he spent the entire day, from early morn to dewy eve, in hunting, he went to bed every evening as soon as supper was over.

What a horrible insult! Still, she was certain that Martial, on hearing what she

had done, would hasten to her to make his excuses. Vain hope! He did not come; he did not even condescend to give one sign of life.

"Ah! doubtlesss he is with her," she said to Aunt Medea. "He is on his knees before that miserable Marie-Anne—his mistress."

For she had finished by believing—as is not unfrequently the case—the very calumnies which she herself had invented.

In this extremity she decided to make her father her confidant; and she wrote him a note announcing her coming.

She wished her father to compel Lacheneur to leave the country. This would be an easy matter for him, since he was armed with discretionary authority at an epoch when luke-warm devotion afforded an abundant excuse for sending a man into exile.

Fully decided upon this plan, Blanche became calmer on leaving the chateau; and her hopes overflowed in incoherent phrases, to which poor Aunt Medea listened with her accustomed resignation.

"At last I shall be rid of this shameless creature!" she exclaimed. "We will see if he has the audacity to follow her! Will he follow her? .Oh, no; he dare not!"

When the carriage passed through the village of Sairmeuse, Mlle. Blanche noticed an unwonted animation.

There were lights in every house, the saloons seemed full of drinkers, and groups of people were standing upon the public square and upon the doorsteps.

But what did this matter to Mlle. de Courtornieu! It was not until they were a mile or so from Sairmeuse that she was startled from her reverie.

"Listen, Aunt Medea," she said, suddenly. "Do you hear anything?"

The poor dependent listened. Both occupants of the carriage heard shouts that became more and more distinct with each revolution of the wheels.

"Let us find out the meaning of this," said Mlle. Blanche.

And lowering one of the carriage windows, she asked the coachman the cause of the disturbance.

"I see a great crowd of peasants on the hill; they have torches and——"

"Blessed Jesus!" interrupted Aunt Medea, in alarm.

"It must be a wedding," added the coachman, whipping up his horses.

It was not a wedding, but Lacheneur's little band, which had been augmented to the number of about five hundred.

Lacheneur should have been at the Croix d'Arcy two hours before. But he had shared the fate of most popular chiefs. When an impetus had been given to the movement he was no longer master of it.

Baron d'Escorval had made him lose twenty minutes; he was delayed four times as long in Sairmeuse. When he reached that village, a little behind time, he found the peasants scattered through the wine-shops, drinking to the success of the enterprise.

To tear them from their merry-making was a long and difficult task.

And to crown all, when they were finally induced to resume their line of march, it was impossible to persuade them to extingush the pine knots which they had lighted to serve as torches.

Prayers and threats were alike unavailing. "They wished to see their way," they said.

Poor deluded creatures! They had not the slightest conception of the difficulties and the perils of the enterprise they had undertaken.

They were going to capture a fortified city, defended by a numerous garrison, as if they were bound on a pleasure-jaunt.

Gay, thoughtless, and animated by the imperturbable confidence of a child, they were marching along, arm in arm, singing patriotic songs.

On horseback, in the centre of the band, M. Lacheneur felt his hair turning white with anguish.

Would not this delay ruin everything? What would the others, who were waiting at Croix d'Arcy, think! What were they doing at this very moment?

"Onward! onward!" he repeated.

Maurice, Chanlouineau, Jean, Marie-Anne, and about twenty of the old soldiers of the Empire, understood and shared Lacheneur's despair. They knew the terrible danger they were incurring, and they, too, repeated:

"Faster! Let us march faster!"

Vain exhortation! It pleased these people to go slowly.

Suddenly the entire band stopped. Some of the peasants, chancing to look back, had seen the lamps of Mlle. de Courtornieu's carriage gleaming in the darkness.

It came rapidly onward, and soon overtook them. The peasants recognized the coachman's livery, and greeted the vehicle with shouts of derision.

M. de Courtornieu, by his avariciousness, had made even more enemies than the Duke de Sairmeuse; and all the peasants who thought they had more or less reason to complain of his extortions were delighted at this opportunity to frighten him.

For, that they were not thinking of vengeance, is conclusively proved by the sequel.

Hence great was their disappointment when, on opening the carriage-door, they saw within the vehicle only Mlle. Blanche and Aunt Medea, who uttered the most piercing shrieks.

But Mlle. de Courtornieu was a brave woman.

"Who are you?" she demanded, haughtily, and what do you desire?"

"You will know to-morrow," replied Chanlouineau. "Until then, you are our prisoner.

"I see that you do not know who I am, boy."

"Excuse me. I do know who you are, and, for this very reason, I request you to descend from your carriage. She must leave the carriage, must she not, M. d'Escorval?"

"Very well! I declare that I will not leave my carriage; tear me from it if you dare!"

They would certainly have dared had it not been for Marie-Anne, who checked some peasants as they were springing towards the carriage.

"Let Mlle. de Courtornieu pass without hindrance," said she.

But this permission might produce such serious consequences that Chanlouineau found courage to resist.

"That cannot be, Marie-Anne," said he; "She will warn her father. We must keep her as a hostage; her life may save the life of our friends."

Mlle. Blanche had not recognized her former friend, any more than she had suspected the intentions of this crowd of men.

But Marie-Anne's name, uttered with that of D'Escorval enlightened her at once.

She understood it all, and trembled with rage at the thought that she was at the mercy of her rival. She resolved to place herself under no obligation to Marie-Anne Lacheneur.

"Very well," said she, "we will descend."

Her former friend checked her.

"No," said she, "no! This is not the place for a young girl."

"For an honest young girl, you should say," replied Blanche, with a sneer.

Chanlouineau was standing only a few feet from the speaker with his gun in his hand. If a man had uttered those words he would have been instantly killed. Marie-Anne did not deign to notice them.

"Mademoiselle will turn back," she said, calmly; "and as she can reach Montaignac by the other road, two men will accompany her as far as Courtornieu."

She was obeyed. The carriage turned and rolled away, but not so quickly that Marie-Anne failed to hear Blanche cry:

"Beware, Marie! I will make you pay dearly for your insulting patronage!"

The hours were flying by. This incident had occupied ten minutes more—ten centuries—and the last trace of order had disappeared.

M. Lacheneur could have wept with rage. He called Maurice and Chanlouineau.

"I place you in command," said he; "do all that you can to hurry these idiots onward. I will ride as fast as I can to the Croix-d'Arcy."

He started, but he was only a short distance in advance of his followers when he saw two men running towards him at full speed. One was clad in the attire of a well-to-do bourgeois; the other wore the old uniform of captain in the emperor's guard.

"What has happened?" Lacheneur cried, in alarm.

"All is discovered!"

"Great God!"

"Major Carini has been arrested."

"By whom? How?"

Ah! there was a fatality about it! Just as we were perfecting our arrangements to capture the Duke de Sairmeuse, the duke surprised us. We fled, but the cursed noble pursued us, overtook Carini, seized him by the collar, and dragged him to the citadel."

Lacheneur was overwhelmed; the abbe's gloomy prophecy again resounded in his ears.

"So I warned my friends, and hastened to warn you," continued the officer. "The affair is an utter failure!"

He was only too correct; and Lacheneur knew it even better than he did. But, blinded by hatred and anger, he would not acknowledge that the disaster was irreparable.

He affected a calmness which he did not in the least feel.

"You are easily discouraged, gentlemen," he said, bitterly. "There is, at least, one more chance."

"The devil! Then you have resources of which we are ignorant?"

"Perhaps—that depends. You have just passed the Croix d'Arcy; did you tell any of those people what you have just told me?"

"Not a word."

"How many men are there at the rendezvous?"

"At least two thousand."

"And what is their mood?"

"They are burning to begin the struggle. They are cursing our slowness, and told me to entreat you to make haste."

"In that case our cause is not lost," said Lacheneur, with a threatening gesture. "Wait here until the peasants come up, and say to them that you were sent to tell them to make haste. Bring them on as quickly as possible, and have confidence in me; I will be responsible for the success of the enterprise."

He said this, then putting spurs to his horse galloped away. He had deceived the men. He had no other resources. He did not have the slightest hope of

success. It was an abominable falsehood. But, if this edifice, which he had erected with such care and labor, was to totter and fall, he desired to be buried beneath its ruins. They would be defeated; he was sure of it, but what did that matter? In the conflict he would seek death and find it.

Bitter discontent pervaded the crowd at the Croix d'Arcy; and after the passing of the officers, who had hastened to warn Lacheneur of the disaster at Montaignac, the murmurs of dissatisfaction were changed to curses.

These peasants, nearly two thousand in number, were indignant at not finding their leader awaiting them at the rendezvous.

"Where is he?" they asked. "Who knows but he is afraid at the last moment? Perhaps he is concealing himself while we are risking our lives and the bread of our children here."

And already the epithets of mischief-maker and traitor were flying from lip to lip, and increasing the anger in every breast.

Some were of the opinion that the crowd should disperse; others wished to march against Montaignac without Lacheneur, and that, immediately.

But these deliberations were interrupted by the furious gallop of a horse.

A carriage appeared, and stopped in the centre of the open space.

Two men alighted; Baron d'Escorval and Abbe Midon.

They were in advance of Lacheneur. They thought they had arrived in time.

Alas! here, as on the Reche, all their efforts, all their entreaties, and all their threats were futile.

They had come in the hope of arresting the movement; they only precipitated it.

"We have gone too far to draw back," exclaimed one of the neighboring farmers, who was the recognized leader in Lacheneur's absence. "If death is before us, it is also behind us. To attack and conquer—that is our only hope of salvation. Forward, then, at once. That is the only way of disconcerting our enemies. He who hesitates is a coward! Forward!

A shout of approval from two thousand throats replied:

"Forward!"

They unfurled the tri-color, that much regretted flag that reminded them of so much glory, and so many great misfortunes; the drums began to beat, and with shouts of: "Vive Napoleon II.!" the whole column took up its line of march.

Pale, with clothing in disorder, and voices husky with fatigue and emotion, M, d'Escorval and the abbe followed the rebels, imploring them to listen to reason.

They saw the precipice toward which these misguided creatures were rushing, and they prayed God for an inspiration to check them.

In fifty minutes the distance separating the Croix d'Arcy from Montaignac is traversed.

Soon they see the gate of the citadel, which was to have been opened for them by their friends within the walls.

It is eleven o'clock, and yet this gate stands open.

Does not this circumstance prove that their friends are masters of the town, and that they are awaiting them in force?

They advance, so certain of success that those who have guns do not even take the trouble to load them.

M. d'Escorval and the abbe alone foresee the catastrophe.

The leader of the expedition is near them, they entreat him not to neglect the commonest precautions, they implore him to send some two men on in advance to reconnoitre; they, themselves, offer to go, on condition that the peasants will await their return before proceeding farther.

But their prayers are unheeded.

The peasants pass the outer line of fortifications in safety. The head of the advancing column reaches the drawbridge.

The enthusiasm amounts to delirium; who will be the first to enter is the only thought.

Alas! at that very moment a pistol is fired.

It is a signal, for instantly, and on every side, resounds a terrible fusillade.

Three or four peasants fall, mortally wounded. The rest pause, frozen with terror, thinking only of escape.

The indecision is terrible; but the leader encourages his men, there are a few of Napoleon's old soldiers in the ranks. A struggle begins, all the more frightful by reason of the darkness!

But it is not the cry of "Forward!" that suddenly rends the air.

The voice of a coward sends up the cry of panic:

"We are betrayed! Let him save himself who can!"

This is the end of all order. A wild fear seizes the throng; and these men flee madly, despairingly, scattered as withered leaves are scattered by the power of the tempest.

CHAPTER LXVI.

CHUPIN'S stupefying revelations and the thought that Martial, the heir of his name and dukedom, should degrade himself so low as to enter into a conspiracy with vulgar peasants, drove the Duke de Sairmeuse nearly wild.

But the Marquis de Courtornieu's coolness restored the duke's *sang froid.*

He ran to the barracks, and in less than half an hour five hundred foot soldiers and three hundred of the Montaignac chasseurs were under arms.

With these forces at his disposal it would have been easy enough to suppress this movement without the least bloodshed. It was only necessary to close the gates of the city It was not with fowling-pieces and clubs that these poor peasants could force an entrance into a fortified town.

But such moderation did not suit a man of the duke's violent temperament, a man who was ever longing for struggle and excitement, a man whose ambition prompted him to display his zeal.

He had ordered the gate of the citadel to be left open, and had concealed some of his soldiers behind the parapets of the outer fortifications.

He then stationed himself where he could command a view of the approach to the citadel, and deliberately choose his moment for giving the signal to fire.

Still, a strange thing happened. Of four hundred shots, fired into a dense crowd of fifteen hundred men, only three had hit the mark.

More humane than their chief, nearly all the soldiers had fired in the air.

But the duke had not time to investigate this strange occurrence now. He leaped into the saddle, and placing himself at the head of about five hundred men, cavalry and infantry, he started in pursuit of the fugitives.

The peasants had the advantage of their pursuers by about twenty minutes.

Poor simple creatures!

They might easily have made their escape. They had only to disperse, to scatter; but, unfortunately, the thought never once occurred to the majority of them. A few ran across the fields and gained their homes in safety; the others, frantic and despairing, overcome by that strange vertigo that seizes the bravest in moments of panic, fled like a flock of frightened sheep.

Fear lent them wings, for did they not hear each moment shots fired at the laggards?

But there was one man, who, at each of these detonations, received, as it were, his death-wound—this man was Lacheneur.

He had reached the Croix d'Arcy just as the firing at Montaignac began. He listened and waited. No discharge of musketry replied to thc first fusillade. There might have been butchery, but combat, no.

Lacheneur understood it all; and he wished that every ball had pierced his own heart.

He put spurs to his horse and galloped to the cross-roads. The place was deserted. At the entrance of one of the roads stood the cabriolet which had brought M. d'Escorval and the abbe.

At last M. Lacheneur saw the fugitives approaching in the distance. He dashed forward to meet them, trying by mingled curses and insults to stay their flight.

"Cowards!" he vociferated, "traitors! You flee—and you are ten against one! Where are you going? To your own homes? Fools! you will find the gendarmes there only awaiting your coming to conduct you to the scaffold. Is it not better to die with your weapons in your hands? Come—right about. Follow me! We may still conquer. Re-inforcements are at hand; two thousand men are following me!"

He promised them two thousand men; had he promised them ten thousand, twenty thousand—an army and cannon, it would have made no difference.

Not until they reached the wide open space of the cross-roads, where they had talked so confidently scarcely an hour before, did the most intelligent of the throng regain their senses, while the others fled in every direction.

About a hundred of the bravest and most determined of the conspirators gathered around M. Lacheneur. In the little crowd was the abbe, gloomy and despondent. He had been separated from the baron. What had been his fate? Had he been killed or taken prisoner? Was it possible that he had made his escape?

The worthy priest dared not go away. He waited, hoping that his companion might rejoin him, and deemed himself fortunate in finding the carriage still there. He was still waiting when the remnant of the column confided to Maurice and Chanlouineau came up.

Of the five hundred men that composed it on its departure from Sairmeuse, only fifteen remained, including the two retired officers.

Marie-Anne was in the centre of this little party.

M. Lacheneur and his friends were trying to decide what course it was best for them to pursue. Should each man go his way? or should they unite, and by an obstinate resistance, give all their comrades time to reach their homes?

The voice of Chanlouineau put an end to all hesitation.

"I have come to fight," he exclaimed, "and I shall sell my life dearly."

"We will make a stand then!" cried the others.

But Chanlouineau did not follow them to the spot which they had considered best adapted to the prolonged defense; he called Maurice and drew him a little aside.

"You, Monsieur d'Escorval," he said, almost roughly, "are going to leave here and at once."

"I—I came here, Chanlouineau, as you did, to do my duty."

"Your duty, monsieur, is to serve Marie-Anne. Go at once, and take her with you."

"I shall remain," said Maurice, firmly.

He was going to join his comrades when Chanlouineau stopped him.

"You have no right to sacrifice your life here," he said, quietly. "Your life belongs to the woman who has given herself to you."

"Wretch! how dare you!"

Chanlouineau sadly shook his head.

"What is the use of denying it?" said he.

"It was so great a temptation that only an angel could have resisted it. It was not your fault, nor was it hers. Lacheneur was a bad father. There was a day when I wished either to kill myself or to kill you, I knew not which. Ah! only once again will you be as near death as you were that day. You were scarcely five paces from the muzzle of my gun. It was God who stayed my hand by reminding me of her despair. Now that I am to die, as well as Lacheneur, some one must care for Marie-Anne. Swear that you will marry her. You may be involved in some difficulty on account of this affair; but I have here the means of saving you."

A sound of firing interrupted him; the soldiers of the Duke de Sairmeuse were approaching.

"Good God!" exclaimed Chanlouineau, "and Marie-Anne!"

They rushed in pursuit of her, and Maurice was the first to discover her, standing in the centre of the open space clinging to the neck of her father's horse. He took her in his arms, trying to drag her away.

"Come!" said he, "come!"

But she refused.

"Leave me, leave me!" she entreated.

"But all is lost!"

"Yes, I know that all is lost—even honor. Leave me here. I must remain; I must die, and thus hide my shame. It must, it shall be so!"

Just then Chanlouineau appeared.

Had he divined the secret of her resistance? Perhaps; but without uttering a word, he lifted her in his strong arms as if she had been a child and bore her to the carriage guarded by Abbe Midon.

"Get in," he said, addressing the priest, "and quick—take Mlle. Lacheneur. Now, Maurice, in your turn!"

But already the duke's soldiers were masters of the field. Seeing a group in the shadow, at a little distance, they rushed to the spot.

The heroic Chanlouineau seized his gun, and brandishing it like a club held the enemy at bay, giving Maurice time to spring into the carriage, catch the reins and start the horse off at a gallop.

All the cowardice and all the heroism displayed on that terrible night will never be really known.

Two minutes after the departure of Marie-Anne and of Maurice, Chanlouineau was still battling with the foe.

A dozen or more soldiers were in front of him. Twenty shots had been fired, but not a ball had struck him. His enemies always believed him invulnerable.

"Surrender!" cried the soldiers, amazed by such valor; "surrender!"

"Never! never!"

He was truly formidable; he brought to the support of his marvelous courage a superhuman strength and agility. No one dared come within reach of those brawny arms, that revolved with the power and velocity of the sails of a windmill.

Then it was that a soldier, confiding his musket to the care of a companion, threw himself flat upon his belly, and crawling unobserved around behind this obscure hero, seized him by the legs. He tottered like an oak beneath the blow of the axe, struggled furiously, but taken at such a disadvantage was thrown to the ground, crying, as he fell:

"Help! friends, help!"

But no one responded to this appeal.

At the other end of the open space those upon whom he called had, after a desperate struggle, yielded.

The main body of the duke's infantry was near at hand.

The rebels heard the drums beating the charge; they could see the bayonets gleaming in the sunlight.

Lacheneur, who had remained in the same spot, utterly ignoring the shot that whistled around him, felt that his few remaining comrades were about to be exterminated.

In that supreme moment the whole past was revealed to him as by a flash of lightning. He read and judged his own heart. Hatred had led him to crime. He loathed himself for the humiliation which he had imposed upon his daughter. He cursed himself for the falsehoods by which he had deceived these brave men, for whose death he would be accountable.

Enough blood had flowed; he must save those who remained.

"Cease firing, my friends," he commanded; "retreat!"

They obeyed—he could see them scatter in every direction.

He too could flee; was he not mounted upon a gallant steed, which would bear him beyond the reach of the enemy?

But he had sworn that he would not survive defeat. Maddened with remorse,

despair, sorrow, and impotent rage, he saw no refuge save in death.

He had only to wait for it; it was fast approaching; he preferred to rush to meet it. Gathering up the reins, he dashed the rowels in his steed and, alone, charged upon the enemy.

The shock was rude, the ranks opened, there was a moment of confusion.

But Lacheneur's horse, its chest cut open by the bayonets, reared, beat the air with his hoofs, then fell backward, burying his rider beneath him.

And the soldiers marched on, not suspecting that beneath the body of the horse the brave rider was struggling to free himself.

It was half-past one in the morning—the place was deserted.

Nothing disturbed the silence save the moans of a few wounded men, who called upon their comrades for succor.

But before thinking of the wounded, M. de Sairmeuse must decide upon the course which would be most likely to redound to his advantage and to his political glory.

Now that the insurrection had been suppressed, it was necessary to exaggerate its magnitude as much as possible, in order that his reward should be in proportion to the service supposed to have been rendered.

Some fifteen or twenty rebels had been captured; but that was not a sufficient number to give the victory the *eclat* which he desired. He must find more culprits to drag before the provost marshal or before a military commission.

He, therefore, divided his troops into several detachments, and sent them in every direction with orders to explore the villages, search all isolated houses, and arrest all suspected persons.

His task here having been completed, he again recommended the most implacable severity, and started on a brisk trot for Montaignac.

He was delighted; certainly he blessed—as had M. de Courtornieu—these honest and artless conspirators; but one fear, which he vainly tried to dismiss, impaired his satisfaction.

His son, the Marquis de Sairmeuse, was he, or was he not, implicated in this conspiracy?

He could not, he would not, believe it; and yet the recollection of Chupin's assurance troubled him.

On the other hand, what could have become of Martial? The servant who had been sent to warn him—had he met him? Was the marquis returning? And by which road? Could it be possible that he had fallen into the hands of the peasants?

The duke's relief was intense when, on returning home after a conference with M. de Courtornieu, he learned that Martial had arrived about a quarter of an hour before.

"The marquis went at once to his own room on dismounting from his horse," added the servant.

"Very well," replied the Duke. "I will seek him there."

Before the servants he said, "Very well;" but secretly, he exclaimed: "Abominable impertinence! What! I am on horseback at the head of my troops, my life imperilled, and my son goes quietly to bed without even assuring himself of my safety!"

He reached his son's room, but found the door closed and locked on the inside. He rapped.

"Who is there?" demanded Martial.

"It is I; open the door."

Martial drew the bolt; M. de Sairmeuse entered, but the sight that met his gaze made him tremble.

Upon the table was a basin of blood, and Martial, with chest bared, was bathing a large wound in his right breast.

"You have been fighting!" exclaimed the Duke, in a husky voice.

"Yes."

"Ah!—then you were, indeed——"

"I was where?—what?"

"At the convocation of these miserable peasants who, in their parricidal folly, have dared to dream of the overthrow of the best of princes!"

Martial's face betrayed successively profound surprise, and a more violent desire to laugh.

"I think you must be jesting, monsieur," he replied.

The young man's words and manner reassured the duke a little, without entirely dissipating his suspicions.

"Then these vile rascals attacked you?" he exclaimed.

"Not at all. I have been simply obliged to fight a duel."

"With whom? Name the scoundrel who has dared to insult you?"

A faint flush tinged Martial's cheek; but it was in his usual careless tone that he replied:

"Upon my word, no; I shall not give his name. You would trouble him, perhaps; and I really owe the fellow a debt of gratitude. It happened upon the highway; he might have assassinated me without ceremony, but he offered me open combat. Besides, he was wounded far more severely than I."

All M. de Sairmeuse's doubts had returned.

"And why, instead of summoning a physician, are you attempting to dress this wound yourself?

"Because it is a mere trifle, and because I wish to keep it a secret."

The duke shook his head.

"All this is scarcely plausible," he remarked; "especially after the assurance

of your complicity, which I have received."

"Ah!" said he; "and from whom? From your spy-in-chief, no doubt—that rascal Chupin. It surprises me to see that you can hesitate for a moment between the word of your son and the stories of such a wretch."

"Do not speak ill of Chupin, marquis; he is a very useful man. Had it not been for him, we should have been taken unawares. It was through him that I learned of this vast conspiracy organized by Lacheneur——"

"What! is it Lacheneur——"

"Who is at the head of the movement?—yes, marquis. Ah! your usual discernment has failed you in this instance. What, you have been a constant visitor at this house, and you have suspected nothing? And you contemplate a diplomatic career! But this is not all. You know now for what purpose the money which you so lavishly bestowed upon them has been employed. They have used it to purchase guns, powder and ammunition."

The duke had become satisfied of the injustice of his suspicions; but he was now endeavoring to irritate his son.

It was a fruitless effort. Martial knew very well that he had been duped, but he did not think of resenting it.

"If Lacheneur has been captured," he thought; "if he should be condemned to death and if I should save him, Marie-Anne would refuse me nothing."

CHAPTER LXVII.

HAVING penetrated the mystery that enveloped his son's frequent absence, the Baron d'Escorval had concealed his fears and his chagrin from his wife.

It was the first time that he had ever had a secret from the faithful and courageous companion of his existence.

Without warning her, he went to beg Abbe Midon to follow him to the Reche, to the house of M. Lacheneur.

The silence, on his part, explains Mme. d'Escorval's astonishment when, on the arrival of the dinner-hour, neither her son nor her husband appeared.

Maurice was sometimes late; but the baron, like all great workers, was punctuality itself. What extraordinary thing could have happened?

Her surprise became uneasiness when she learned that her husband had departed in company with Abbe Midon. They had harnessed the horse themselves, and instead of driving through the court-yard as usual, they had driven through the stable-yard into a lane leading to the public road.

What did all this mean? Why these strange precautions?

Mme. d'Escorval waited, oppressed by vague forebodings,

The servants shared her anxiety. The baron was so equable in temper, so kind and just to his inferiors, that his servants adored him, and would have gone through a fiery furnace for him.

So, about ten o'clock, they hastened to lead to their mistress a peasant who was returning from Sairmeuse.

This man who was slightly intoxicated, told the strangest and most incredible stories.

He said that all the peasantry for ten leagues around were under arms, and that the Baron d'Escorval was the leader of the revolt.

He did not doubt the final success of the movement, declaring that Napoleon II., Marie-Louise, and all the marshals of the empire were concealed in Montaignac.

Alas! it must be confessed that Lacheneur had not hesitated to utter the grossest falsehoods in his anxiety to gain followers.

Mme. d'Escorval could not be deceived by these ridiculous stories, but she could believe, and she did believe that the baron was the prime mover in this insurrection.

And this belief, which would have carried consternation to the hearts of so many women, reassured her.

She had entire, absolute, and unlimited faith in her husband. She believed him superior to all other men—infallible, in short. The moment he said: "This is so!" she believed it implicitly.

Hence, if her husband had organized a movement, that movement was right. If he had attempted it, it was because he expected to succeed. Therefore, it was sure to succeed.

Impatient, however, to know the result, she sent the gardener to Sairmeuse with orders to obtain information without awakening suspicion, if possible, and to hasten back as soon as he could learn anything of a positive nature.

He returned in about two hours, pale, frightened, and in tears.

The disaster had already become known, and had been related to him with the most terrible exaggerations. He had been told that hundreds of men had been killed, and that a whole army was scouring the country, massacring defenceless peasants and their families.

While he was telling his story, Mme. d'Escorval felt that she was going mad.

She saw—yes, positively, she saw her son and her husband, dead—or still worse, mortally wounded upon the public highway—they were lying with their arms crossed upon their breasts, livid, bloody, their eyes staring wildly—they were begging for water—a drop of water.

"I will find them!" she exclaimed, in

frenzied accents. "I will go to the field of battle, I will seek for them among the dead, until I find them. Light some torches, my friends, and come with me, for you will aid me, will you not? You loved them; they were so good! You would not leave their dead bodies unburied! oh! the wretches! the wretches who have killed them!"

The servants were hastening to obey when the furious gallop of a horse and the sound of carriage-wheels were heard upon the drive.

"Here they are!" exclaimed the gardener, "here they are!"

Mme d'Escorval, followed by the servants, rushed to the door just in time to see a cabriolet enter the court-yard, and the horse, panting, exhausted, and flecked with foam, miss his footing, and fall.

Abbe Midon and Maurice had already leaped to the ground and were lifting out an apparently lifeless body.

Even Marie-Anne's great energy had not been able to resist so many successive shocks; the last trial had overwhelmed her. Once in the carriage, all immediate danger having disappeared, the excitement which had sustained her fled. She became unconscious, and all the efforts of Maurice and of the priest had failed to restore her.

But Mme. d'Escorval did not recognize Mlle. Lacheneur in the masculine habiliments in which she was clothed.

She only saw that it was not her husband whom they had brought with them; and a convulsive shudder shook her from head to foot.

"Your father, Maurice!" she exclaimed, in a stifled voice; "and your father?"

The effect was terrible. Until that moment, Maurice and the *cure* had comforted themselves with the hope that M. d'Escorval would reach home before them.

Maurice tottered, and almost dropped his precious burden. The abbe perceived it, and at a sign from him, two servants gently lifted Marie-Anne, and bore her to the house.

Then the *cure* approached Mme. d'Escorval.

"Monsieur will soon be here, madame," said he, at hazard; "he fled first——"

"Baron d'Escorval could not have fled," she interrupted. "A general does not desert when face to face with the enemy. If a panic seizes his soldiers, he rushes to the front, and either leads them back to combat, or takes his own life."

"Mother!" faltered Maurice; "mother!"

"Oh! do not try to deceive me. My husband was the organizer of this conspiracy—his confederates beaten and dispersed must have proved themselves cowards. God have mercy upon me, my husband is dead!"

In spite of the abbe's quickness of perception, he could not understand such assertions on the part of the baroness; he thought that sorrow and terror must have destroyed her reason.

"Ah! madame," he exclaimed, "the baron had nothing to do with this movement; far from it——"

He paused; all this was passing in the court-yard, in the glare of the torches which had been lighted up by the servants. Any one in the public road could hear and see all. He realized the imprudence of which they was guilty.

"Come, madame," said he, leading the baroness toward the house; and you also, Maurice, come!"

It was with the silent and passive submission of great misery that Mme. d'Escorval obeyed the *cure*.

Her body alone moved in mechanical obedience; her mind and heart were flying through space to the man who was her all, and whose mind and heart were even then, doubtless, calling to her from the dread abyss into which he had fallen.

But when she had passed the threshold of the drawing-room, she trembled and dropped the priest's arm, rudely recalled to the present reality.

She recognized Marie-Anne in the lifeless form extended upon the sofa.

"Mlle. Lacheneur!" she faltered, "here in this costume—dead!"

One might indeed believe the poor girl dead, to see her lying there rigid, cold, and as white as if the last drop of blood had been drained from her veins. Her beautiful face had the immobility of marble; her half-opened, colorless lips disclosed teeth convulsively clenched, and a large dark blue circle surrounded her closed eyelids.

Her long black hair, which she had rolled up closely to slip under her peasant's hat, had become unbound, and flowed down in rich masses over her shoulders and trailed upon the floor.

"She is only in a state of syncope; there is no danger," declared the abbe, after he had examined Marie-Anne. "It will not be long before she regains consciousness."

And then, rapidly but clearly, he gave the necessary directions to the servants, who were astonished at their mistress.

Mme. d'Escorval looked on with eyes dilated with terror. She seemed to doubt her own sanity, and incessantly passed her hand across her forehead, thickly beaded with cold sweat.

"What a night!" she murmured. "What a night!"

"I must remind you, madame," said the priest, sympathizingly, but firmly, "that reason and duty alike forbid you thus to yield to despair! Wife, where is

your energy? Christian, what has become of your confidence in a just and beneficial God?"

"Oh! I have courage, monsieur," faltered the wretched woman. "I am brave!"

The abbe led her to a large arm-chair where he forced her to seat herself, and in a gentler tone, he resumed:

"Besides, why should you despair, madame? Your son, certainly, is with you in safety. Your husband has not compromised himself; he has done nothing which I, myself, have not done."

And briefly, but with rare precision, he explained the part which he and the baron had played during this unfortunate evening.

But this recital, instead of reassuring the baroness, seemed to increase her anxiety.

"I understand you," she interrupted, "and I believe you. But I also know that all the people in the country round about are convinced that my husband commanded the insurrectionists. They believe it, and they will say it."

"And what of that?"

"If he has been arrested, as you give me to understand, he will be summoned before a court-martial. Was he not the friend of the emperor? That is a crime, as you very well know. He will be convicted and sentenced to death."

"No, madam, no! Am I not here? I will appear before the tribunal, and I shall say: 'Here I am! I have seen and I know all.'"

"But they will arrest you, alas, monsieur, because you are not a priest according to the hearts of these cruel men. They will throw you in prison, and you will meet him upon the scaffold."

Maurice had been listening, pale and trembling.

But on hearing these last words, he sank upon his knees, hiding his face in his hands:

"Ah! I have killed my father!" he exclaimed.

"Unhappy child! what do you say?"

The priest motioned him to be silent; but he did not see him, and he pursued:

"My father was ignorant even of the existence of this conspiracy of which M. Lacheneur was the guiding spirit; but I knew it—I wished him to succeed, because on his success depended the happiness of my life. And then—wretch that I was!—when I wished to attract to our ranks some timid or wavering accomplice, I used the loved and respected name of D'Escorval. Ah, I was mad!—I was mad!"

Then with a despairing gesture, he added;

"And yet, even now, I have not the courage to curse my folly! Oh, mother, mother, if you knew——"

His sobs interrupted him. Just then a faint moan was heard.

Marie-Anne was regaining consciousness. Already she had partially risen from the sofa, and sat regarding this terrible scene with an air of profound wonder, as if she did not understand it in the least.

Slowly and gently she put back her hair from her face, and opened and closed her eyes, which seemed dazzled by the light of the candles.

She endeavored to speak, to ask some question, but Abbe Midon commanded silence by a gesture.

Enlightened by the words of Mme. d'Escorval, and by the confession of Maurice, the abbe understood at once the extent of the frightful danger that menaced the baron and his son.

How was this danger to be averted? What must be done?

He had no time for explanation or reflection: with each moment, a chance of salvation fled. He must decide and act without delay.

The abbe was a brave man. He darted to the door, and called the servants who were standing in the hall and on the staircase.

When they were gathered around him:

"Listen to me, intently," said he, in that quick and imperious voice that impresses one with the certainty of approaching peril, "and remember that your master's life depends, perhaps, upon your discretion. We can rely upon you, can we not?"

Every hand was raised as if to call upon God to witness their fidelity.

"In less than an hour," continued the priest, "the soldiers sent in pursuit of the fugitives will be here. Not a word must be uttered in regard to what has passed this evening. Every one must be led to suppose that I went away with the baron, and returned alone. Not one of you must have seen Mlle. Lacheneur. We are going to find a place of concealment for her. Remember, my friends, if there is the slightest suspicion of her presence here, all is lost. If the soldiers question you, endeavor to convince them that M. Maurice has not left the house this evening."

He paused trying to think if he had forgotten any precaution that human prudence could suggest, then added:

"One word more; to see you standing about at this hour of the night will awaken suspicion at once. But this is what I desire. We will plead in justification, the alarm that you feel at the absence of the baron, and also the indisposition of madame—for madame is going to retire—she will thus escape interrogation. And you, Maurice, run and change your clothes; and, above all, wash your

hands, and sprinkle some perfume upon them."

All present were so impressed with the imminence of the danger, that they were more than willing to obey the priest's orders.

Marie-Anne, as soon as she could be moved, was carried to a tiny room under the roof. Mme. d'Escorval retired to her own apartment, and the servants went back to the office.

Maurice and the abbe remained alone in the drawing-room, silent and appalled by horrible forebodings.

The unusually calm face of the priest betrayed his terrible anxiety. He now felt convinced that Baron d'Escorval was a prisoner, and all his efforts were now directed towards removing any suspicion of complicity from Maurice.

"This was," he reflected, "the only way to save the father."

A violent peal of the bell attached to the gate interrupted his meditations.

He heard the footsteps of the gardener as he hastened to open it, heard the gate turn upon its hinges, then the measured tramp of soldiers in the court-yard.

A loud voice commanded:

"Halt!"

The priest looked at Maurice and saw that he was as pale as death.

"Be calm," he entreated, "do not be alarmed. Do not lose your self-possession—and do not forget my instructions."

"Let them come," replied Maurice. "I am prepared!"

The drawing-room door was flung violently open, and a young man, wearing the uniform of a captain of grenadiers, entered. He was scarcely twenty-five years of age, tall, fair-haired, with blue eyes and little waxed moustache. His whole person betokened an excessive elegance exaggerated to the verge of the ridiculous. His face ordinarily must have indicated extreme self-complacency, but at the present moment it wore a really ferocious expression.

Behind him, in the passage, were a number of armed soldiers.

He cast a suspicious glance around the room, then, in a harsh voice:

"Who is the master of this house?" he demanded.

"The Baron d'Escorval, my father, "who is absent," replied Maurice.

"Where is he?"

The abbe, who, until now, had remained seated, rose.

"On hearing of the unfortunate outbreak of this evening," he replied, "the baron and myself went to these peasants in the hope of inducing them to relinquish their foolish undertaking. They would not listen to us. In the confusion that ensued, I became separated from the baron; I returned here very anxious, and am now awaiting his return."

The captain twisted his moustache with a sneering air.

"Not a bad invention!" said he. "Only I do not believe a word of this fiction."

A light gleamed in the eyes of the priest, his lips trembled—but he held his peace.

"Who are you?" rudely demanded the officer.

"I am the *cure* of Sairmeuse."

"Honest men ought to be in bed at this hour. And you are racing about the country after rebellious peasants. Really, I do not know what prevents me from ordering your arrest."

That which did prevent him was the priestly robe, all powerful under the Restoration. With Maurice he was more at ease.

"How many are there in this family?"

"Three; my father, my mother—ill at this moment—and myself."

"And how many servants?"

"Seven—four men and three women."

"You have neither received nor concealed any one this evening.?"

"No one."

"It will be necessary to prove this," said the captain.

And turning towards the door:

"Corporal Bavois!" he called.

This man was one of those old soldiers who had followed the emperor over all Europe. Two small ferocious gray eyes lighted his tanned, weather-beaten face, and an immense hooked nose surmounted a heavy, bristling moustache.

"Bavois," commanded the officer, "you will take half a dozen men and search this house from top to bottom. You are an old fox that knows a thing or two. If there is any hiding-place here, you will be sure to discover it; if any one is concealed here, you will bring the person to me. "Go, and make haste!"

The corporal departed on his mission; the captain resumed his questions.

"And now," said he, turning to Maurice, "what have you been doing this evening?"

The young man hesitated for an instant; then, with well-feigned indifference, replied:

"I have not put my head outside the door this evening."

"Hum! that must be proved. Let me see your hands."

The soldier's tone was so offensive that Maurice felt the angry blood mount to his forehead. Fortunately a warning glance from the abbe made him restrain his wrath.

He offered his hands to the inspection of the captain, who examined them carefully, outside and in, and finally smelled them.

"Ah! these hands are too white and smell too sweet to have been dabbling in powder."

He was evidently surprised that this young man should have had so little courage as to remain in the shelter of the fireside while his father was leading the peasants on to battle.

"Another thing," said he; "you must have weapons here?"

"Yes, hunting rifles."

"Where are they?"

"In a small room on the ground floor."

"Take me there."

They conducted him to the room, and on finding that none of the double-barrelled guns had been used for some days, he seemed considerably annoyed.

He appeared furious when the corporal came and told him that he had searched everywhere, but had found nothing of a suspicious character.

"Send for the servants," was his next order.

But all the servants faithfully repeated the lesson which the abbe had given them.

The captain saw that he was not likely to discover the mystery, although he was well satisfied that one existed.

Swearing that they should pay dearly for it, if they were deceiving him, he again called Bavois.

"I must continue my search," said he. "You, with two men, will remain here, and render a strict account of all that you see and hear. If M. d'Escorval returns, bring him to me at once; do not allow him to escape. Keep your eyes open, and good luck to you!"

He added a few words in a low voice, then left the room as abruptly as he had entered it.

The departing footsteps of the soldiers were soon lost in the stillness of the night, and then the corporal gave vent to his disgust in a frightful oath.

"*Hein!*" said he, to his men, "you have heard that cadet. Listen, watch, arrest, report. So he takes us for spies! Ah! if our old leader knew to what base uses his old soldiers were degraded!"

The two men responded by a sullen growl.

"As for you," pursued the old trooper, addressing Maurice and the abbe, "I Bavois, corporal of grenadiers, declare in my name and in that of my two men, that you are as free as birds, and that we shall arrest no one. More than that, if we can aid you in any way, we are at your service. The little fool that commanded us this evening thought we were fighting. Look at my gun—I have not fired a shot from it—and my comrades fired only blank cartridges."

The man might possibly be sincere, but it was scarcely probable.

"We have nothing to conceal," replied the cautious priest.

The old corporal gave a knowing wink.

"Ah! you distrust me! You are wrong; and I am going to prove it. Because, you see, though it is easy to gull that fool who just left here, it is not so easy to deceive Corporal Bavois. Very well! it was scarcely prudent to leave in the court-yard a gun that certainly had not been charged for firing at swallows."

The cure and Maurice exchanged a glance of consternation. Maurice now recollected, for the first time, that when he sprang from the carriage to lift out Marie-Anne, he propped his loaded gun against the wall. It had escaped the notice of the servants.

"Secondly!" pursued Bavois, "there is some one concealed in the attic. I have excellent ears. Thirdly, I arranged it so that no one should enter the sick lady's room.

Maurice needed no further proof. He extended his hand to the corporal, and, in a voice trembling with emotion, he said:

"You are a brave man!"

A few moments later, Maurice, the abbe, and Mme. d'Escorval were again assembled in the drawing-room, deliberating upon the measures which must be taken when Marie-Anne appeared.

She was still frightfully pale; but her step was firm, her manner quiet and composed.

"I must leave this house," she said, to the baroness. "Had I been conscious, I would never have accepted hospitality which is likly to bring dire misfortune on your family. Alas! your acquaintance with me has cost you too many tears and too much sorrow already. Do you understand now, why I wished you to regard us as strangers? A presentiment told me that my family would be fatal to yours!"

"Poor child!" exclaimed Mme. d'Escorval; "where will you go?"

Marie-Anne lifted her beautiful eyes to the Heaven in which she placed her trust.

"I do not know, madame," she replied, "but duty commands me to go. I must learn what has become of my father and my brother, and share their fate."

"What!" exclaimed Maurice, "still this thought of death. You, who no longer——"

He paused; a secret which was not his own had almost escaped his lips. But visited by a sudden inspiration, he threw himself at his mother's feet.

"Oh, my mother! my dearest mother, do not allow her to depart. I may perish in my attempt to save my father. She will be your daughter then—she whom I have loved so much. You will encircle her with your tender and protecting love——"

Marie-Anne remained.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

THE secret which approaching death had wrested from Marie-Anne in the fortification at the Croix d'Arcy, Mme. d'Escorval was ignorant of when she joined her entreaties to those of her son to induce the unfortunate girl to remain.

But the fact occasioned Maurice scarcely an uneasiness.

His fate in his mother was complete, absolute; he was sure that she would forgive when she learned the truth.

Loving and chaste wives and mothers are always most indulgent to those who have been led astray by the voice of passion.

Such noble women can, with impunity, despise and brave the prejudices of hypocrites.

These reflections made Maurice feel more tranquil in regard to Marie-Anne's future, and he now thought only of his father.

Day was breaking; he declared that he would assume some disguise and go to Montaignac at once.

On hearing these words, Mme. d'Escorval turned and hid her face in the sofa cushions to stifle her sobs.

She was trembling for her husband's life, and now her son must precipitate himself into danger. Perhaps before the sun sank to rest, she would have neither husband nor son.

And yet she did not say "no." She felt that Maurice was only fulfilling a sacred duty. She would have loved him less had she supposed him capable of cowardly hesitation. She would have dried her tears, if necessary, to bid him "go."

Moreover, what was not preferable to the agony of suspense which they had been enduring for hours?

Maurice had reached the door when the abbe stopped him.

"You must go to Montaignac," said he, "but it would be folly to disguise yourself. You would certainly be recognized, and the saying: 'He who conceals himself is guilty,' will assuredly be applied to you. You must go openly, with head erect, and you must even exaggerate the assurance of innocence. Go straight to the Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu. I will accompany you; we will go in the carriage."

Maurice seemed undecided.

"Obey these counsels, my son," said Mme. d'Escorval; "the abbe knows much better than we do what is best."

"I will obey, mother."

The cure had not waited for this assent to go and give an order for harnessing the horses. Mme. d'Escorval left the room to write a few lines to a lady friend, whose husband exerted considerable influence in Montaignac. Maurice and Marie-Anne were left alone.

It was the first moment of freedom and solitude which they had found since Marie-Anne's confession.

They stood for a moment, silent and motionless, then Maurice advanced, and clasping her in his arms, he whispered:

"Marie-Anne, my darling, my beloved, I did not know that one could love more fondly than I loved you yesterday; but now—— And you—you wish for death when another precious life depends upon yours."

She shook her head sadly.

"I was terrified," she faltered. "The future of shame that I saw—that I still—alas! see before me, appalled me. Now I am resigned. I will uncomplainingly endure the punishment for my horrible fault—I will submit to the insults and disgrace that await me!"

"Insults, to you! Ah! woe to who dares! But will you not now be my wife in the sight of men, as you are in the sight of God? The failure of your father's scheme sets you free!"

"No, no, Maurice, I am not free! Ah! it is you who are pitiless! I see only too well that you curse me, that you curse the day when we met for the first time! Confess it! Say it!"

Marie-Anne lifted her streaming eyes to his.

"Ah! I should lie if I said that. My cowardly heart has not that much courage! I suffer—I am disgraced and humiliated, but——"

She could not finish; he drew her to him, and their lips and their tears met in one long kiss.

"You love me," exclaimed Maurice, "you love me in spite of all! We shall succeed. I will save your father, and mine—I will save your brother!"

The horses were neighing and stamping in the court-yard. The abbe cried: "Come, let us start." Mme. d'Escorval entered with a letter, which she handed to Maurice.

She clasped in a long and convulsive embrace the son whom she feared she should never see again; then, summoning all her courage, she pushed him away, uttering only the single word:

"Go!"

He departed; and when the sound of the carriage-wheels had died away in the distance, Mme. d'Escorval and Marie-Anne fell upon their knees, imploring the mercy and aid of a just God.

They could only pray. The cure and Maurice could act.

Abbe Midon's plan, which he explained to young d'Escorval, as the horses dashed along, was as simple as the situation was terrible.

"If, by confessing your own guilt, you could save your father, I should tell you to deliver yourself up, and to confess the whole truth. Such would be your duty. But this sacrifice would be not only useless, but dangerous. Your confession of guilt would only implicate your father still more. You would be arrested, but they would not release him, and you would both be tried and convicted. Let us, then, allow—I will not say justice, for that would be blasphemy—but these blood-thirsty men, who call themselves judges, to pursue their course, and attribute all that you have done to your father. When the trial comes, you will prove his innocence, and produce *alibis* so incontestable, that they will be forced to acquit him. And I understand the people of our country so well, that I am sure not one of them will reveal our stratagem."

"And if we should not succeed," asked Maurice, gloomily, "what could I do then?"

The question was so terrible that the priest dared not respond to it. He and Maurice were silent during the remainder of the drive.

They reached the city at last, and Maurice saw how wise the abbe had been in preventing him from assuming a disguise.

Armed with the most absolute power, the Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu had closed all the gates of Montaignac save one.

Through this gate all who desired to leave or enter the city were obliged to pass, and two officers were stationed there to examine all comers and goers, to question them, and to take their name and residence.

At the name "D'Escorval," the two officers evinced such surprise that Maurice noticed it at once.

"Ah! you know what has become of my father!" he exclaimed.

"The Baron d'Escorval is a prisoner, monsieur," replied one of the officers.

Although Maurice had expected this response, he turned pale.

"Is he wounded?" he asked, eagerly.

"He has not a scratch. But enter, sir, and pass on."

From the anxious looks of these officers one might have supposed that they feared they should compromise themselves by conversing with the son of so great a criminal.

The carriage rolled beneath the gateway; but it had not traversed two hundred yards of the Grand Rue before the abbe and Maurice had remarked several posters and notices affixed to the walls.

"We must see what this is," they said, in a breath.

They stopped near one of these notices, before which a reader had already stationed himself; they descended from the carriage, and read the following order:

"ARTICLE I.—The inmates of the house in which the elder Lacheneur shall be found will be handed over to a military commission for trial.

"ARTICLE II.—Whoever shall deliver the body of the elder Lacheneur, dead or alive, will receive a reward of twenty thousand francs."

This was signed Duke de Sairmeuse.

"God be praised!" exclaimed Maurice, "Marie-Anne's father has escaped! He had a good horse, and in two hours——"

A glance and a nudge of the elbow from the abbe checked him.

The abbe drew his attention to the man standing near them. This man was none other than Chupin.

The old scoundrel had also recognized them, for he took off his hat to the cure, and with an expression of intense covetousness in his eyes, he said: "Twenty thousand francs! What a sum! A man could live comfortably all his life on the interest of it."

The abbe and Maurice shuddered as they re-entered their carriage.

"Lacheneur is lost if this man discovers his retreat," murmured the priest.

"Fortunately he must have crossed the frontier before this," replied Maurice. "A hundred to one he is beyond reach."

"And if you should be mistaken. What, if wounded and faint from loss of blood, Lacheneur has had only strength to drag himself to the nearest house and ask the hospitality of its inmates?"

"Oh! even in that case he is safe; I know our peasants. There is not one who is capable of selling the life of a proscribed man."

The noble enthusiasm of youth drew a sad smile from the priest.

"You forget the dangers to be incurred by those who shelter him. Many a man who would not soil his hands with the price of blood might deliver up a fugitive from fear."

They were passing through the principal street, and they were struck with the mournful aspect of the place—the little city which was ordinarily so bustling and gay.

Fear and consternation evidently reigned there. The shops were closed; the shutters of the houses had not been opened. A lugubrious silence pervaded the town. One might have supposed that there was general mourning, and that each family had lost one of its members.

The manner of the few persons seen upon the thoroughfare was anxious and singular. They hurried on, casting suspicious glances on every side.

Two or three who were acquaintances of the Baron d'Escorval averted their heads, on seeing his carriage, to avoid the necessity of bowing.

The abbe and Maurice found an explanation of this evident terror on reaching the hotel to which they had ordered the coachman to take them.

They had designated the Hotel de France, where the baron always stopped when he visited Montaignac, and whose proprietor was none other than Laugeron, that friend of Lacheneur, who had been the first to warn him of the arrival of the Duke de Sairmeuse.

This worthy man, on hearing what guests had arrived, went to the court-yard to meet them, with his white cap in his hand.

On such a day politeness was heroism. Was he connected with the conspiracy? It has always been supposed so.

He invited Maurice and the abbe to take some refreshments in a way that made them understand he was anxious to speak with them, and he conducted them to a retired room where he knew they would be secure from observation.

Thanks to one of the Duke de Sairmeuse's valets de chambre who frequented the house, the host knew as much as the authorities; he knew even more, since he had also received information from the rebels who had escaped capture.

From him the abbe and Maurice received their first positive information.

In the first place, nothing had been heard of Lacheneur, or of his son Jean; thus far they had escaped the most rigorous pursuit.

In the second place, there were, at this moment, two hundred prisoners in the citadel, and among them the Baron d'Escorval and Chanlouineau.

And lastly, since morning there had been at least sixty arrests in Montaignac.

It was generally supposed that these arrests were the work of some traitor, and all the inhabitants were trembling with fear.

But M. Laugeron knew the real cause. It had been confided to him under pledge of secrecy by his guest, the duke's valet de chambre.

"It is certainly an incredible story, gentlemen," he said; "nevertheless, it is true. Two officers belonging to the Montaignac militia, on returning from their expedition this morning at daybreak, on passing the Croix d'Arcy, found a man, clad in the uniform of the emperor's body guard, lying dead in the fosse."

Maurice shuddered.

The unfortunate man, he could not doubt, was the brave old soldier who had spoken to Lacheneur.

"Naturally," pursued M. Laugeron, "the two officers examined the body of the dead man. Between his lips they found a paper, which they opened and read. It was a list of all the conspirators in the village. The brave man, knowing he was mortally wounded, endeavored to destroy this fatal list; but the agonies of death prevented him from swallowing it——"

But the abbe and Maurice had not time to listen to the commentaries with which the hotel proprietor accompanied his recital.

They despatched a messenger to Mme. d'Escorval and to Marie-Anne, in order to reassure them, and, without losing a moment, and fully determined to brave all, they went to the house occupied by the Duke de Sairmeuse.

A crowd had gathered about the door. At least a hundred persons were standing there; men with anxious faces, women in tears, soliciting, imploring an audience.

They were the friends and relatives of the unfortunate men who had been arrested.

Two footmen, in gorgeous livery and pompous in bearing, had all they could do to keep back the struggling throng.

The abbe, hoping that his priestly dress would win him a hearing, approached and gave his name. But he was repulsed like the others.

"M. le Duc is busy, and can receive no one," said the servant. "M. le Duc is preparing his report for his majesty."

And in support of this assertion, he pointed to the horses, standing saddled in the court-yard, and the couriers who were to bear the dispatches.

The priest sadly rejoined his companions.

"We must wait!" said he.

Intentionally or not, the servants were deceiving these poor people. The duke, just then, was not troubling himself about dispatches. A violent altercation was going on between the Marquis de Courtornieu and himself.

Each of these noble personages aspired to the leading *role*—the one which would be most generously rewarded, undoubtedly. It was a conflict of ambitions and of wills.

It had begun by the exchange of a few recriminations, and it quickly reached stinging words, bitter allusions, and at last, even threats.

The marquis declared it necessary to inflict the most frightful—he said the most *salutary* punishment upon the offender; the duke, on the contrary, was inclined to be indulgent.

The marquis declared that since Lacheneur, the prime mover, and his son, had both eluded pursuit, it was an urgent necessity to arrest Marie-Anne.

The other declared that the arrest and imprisonment of this young girl would be impolitic, that such a course would render the authorities odious, and the rebels more zealous.

As each was firmly wedded to his own

opinion, the discussion was heated, but they failed to convince each other.

"These rebels must be put down with a strong hand!" urged M. de Courtornieu.

"I do not wish to exasperate the populace," replied the duke.

"Bah! what does public sentiment matter?"

"It matters a great deal when you cannot depend upon your soldiers. Do you know what happened last night? There was powder enought burned to win a battle; there were only fifteen peasants wounded. Our men fired in the air. You forget that the Montaignac militia is composed, for the most part, at least, of men who formerly fought under Bonaparte, and who are burning to turn their weapons against us."

But neither the one nor the other dared to tell the real cause of his obstinacy.

Mlle. Blanche had been at Montaignac that morning. She had confided her anxiety and her sufferings to her father; and she made him swear that he would profit by this opportunity to rid her of Marie-Anne.

One his side, the duke, persuaded that Marie-Anne was his son's mistress, wished at any cost, to prevent her appearance before the tribunal. At last the marquis yielded.

The duke had said to him: "Very well! let us end this dispute," at the same time glancing so meaningly at a pair of pistols that the worthy marquis felt a disagreeable chilliness creep up his spine.

They then went together to examine the prisoners, preceded by a detachment of soldiery who drove back the crowd, which gathered again to await the duke's return. So all day Maurice watched the aerial telegraph established upon the citadel, and whose black arms were moving incessantly.

"What orders are traveling through space?" he said to the abbe; "is it life, or is it death?"

CHAPTER LXIX.

"ABOVE all, make haste!" Maurice had said to the messenger charged with bearing a letter to the baroness.

Nevertheless, the man did not reach Escorval until night-fall.

Beset by a thousand fears, he had taken the unfrequented roads and had made long circuits to avoid all the people he saw approaching in the distance.

Mme. d'Escorval tore the letter rather than took it from his hands. She opened it, read it aloud to Marie-Anne, and merely said:

"Let us go—at once."

But this was easier said than done.

They kept but three horses at Escorval. One was nearly dead from its terrible journey of the previous night; the other two were in Montaignac.

What were the ladies to do? To trust to the kindness of their neighbors was the only resource open to them.

But these neighbors, having heard of the baron's arrest, firmly refused to lend their horse. They believed they would gravely compromise themselves by rendering any service to the wife of a man upon whom the burden of the most terrible of accusations was resting.

Mme. d'Escorval and Marie-Anne were talking of pursuing their journey on foot, when Corporal Bavois, enraged at such cowardice, swore by the sacred name of thunder that this should not be.

"One moment!" said he. "I will arrange the matter."

He went away, but reappeared about a quarter of an hour afterwards, leading an old plough-horse by the mane. This clumsy and heavy steed he harnessed into the cabriolet as best he could.

But even this did not satisfy the old trooper's complaisance.

His duties at the chateau were over, as M. d'Escorval had been arrested, and nothing remained for Corporal Bavois but to rejoin his regiment.

He declared that he would not allow these ladies to travel at night, and unattended, on a road where they might be exposed to many disagreeable encounters, and that he, in company with two grenadiers, would escort them to their journey's end.

"And it will go hard with soldier or civilian who ventures to molest them, will it not, comrades?" he exclaimed.

As usual, the two men, assented with an oath.

So, as they pursued their journey, Mme. d'Escorval and Marie-Anne saw the three men preceding or following the carriage, or oftener walking beside it.

Not until they reached the gates of Montaignac did the old soldier forsake his protegees, and then, not without bidding them a respectful farewell, in the name of his companions as well as himself; not without telling them, if they had need of him, to call upon Bavois, corporal of grenadiers, company first, stationed at the citadel.

The clocks were striking ten when M. d'Escorval and Marie-Anne alighted at the Hotel de France.

They found Maurice in despair, and even the abbe disheartened. Since Maurice had written to them, events had progressed with fearful rapidity.

They knew now the orders which had been forwarded by signals from the citadel. These orders had been printed and affixed to the walls. The signals had said:

"Montaignac must be regarded as in a

state of siege. The military authorities have been granted discretionary power. A military commission will exercise jurisdiction instead of, and in place of, the courts. Let peaceable citizens take courage; let the evil-disposed tremble! As for the rabble, the sword of the law is about to strike!"

Only six lines in all—but each word was a menace.

That which filled the abbe's heart with dismay was the substitution of a military commission for a court-martial.

This upset all his plans, made all his precautions useless, and destroyed his hopes of saving his friend.

A court-martial was, of course, hasty and often unjust in its decisions; but still, it observed some of the forms of procedure practiced in judicial tribunals. It still preserved something of the solemnity of legal justice, which desires to be enlightened before it condemns.

A military commission would infallibly neglect all legal forms; and summarily condemn and punish the accused parties, as in time of war a spy is tried and punished.

"What!" exclaimed Maurice, "they dare to condemn without investigating, without listening to testimony, without allowing the accused time to prepare any defense?"

The abbe was silent. This exceeded his most sinister apprehensions. Now, he believed anything possible.

Maurice spoke an investigation. It had commenced that day, and it was still going on by the light of the jailer's lantern.

That is to say, the Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu were passing the prisoners in review.

They numbered three hundred, and the duke and his companion had decided to summon before the commission thirty of the most dangerous conspirators.

How were they to select them? By what method could they discover the extent of each prisoner's guilt? It would have been difficult for them to explain.

They went from one to another, asking any question that entered their minds, and after the terrified man replied, according as they thought his countenance good or bad, they said to the jailor who accompanied them: "Keep this one until another time," or, "This one, for to-morrow."

By daylight, they had thirty names upon their list: and the names of the Baron d'Escorval and Chanlouineau led all the rest.

Although the unhappy party at the Hotel de France could not suspect this fact, they suffered an agony of fear and dread through the long night which seemed to them eternal.

As soon as day broke, they heard the beating of the *reveille* at the citadel; the hour when they might commence their efforts anew had come.

The abbe announced that he was going alone to the duke's house, and that he would find a way to force an entrance.

He had bathed his red and swollen eyes in fresh water, and was prepared to start on his expedition, when some one rapped cautiously at the door of the chamber.

Maurice cried: "Come in," and M. Laugeron instantly entered the room.

His face announced some dreadful misfortune; and the worthy man was really terrified.

He had just learned that the military commission had been organized.

In contempt of all human laws and the commonest rules of justice, the presidency of this tribunal of vengeance and of hatred had been bestowed upon the Duke de Sairmeuse.

And he had accepted it—he who was at the same time to play the part of participant, witness, and judge.

The other members of the commission were military men.

"And when does the commission enter upon its functions?" inquired the abbe.

"To-day," replied the host, hesitatingly; "this morning—in an hour—perhaps sooner!"

The abbe understood what M. Laugeron meant, but dared not say: "The commission is assembling, make haste."

"Come!" he said to Maurice, "I wish to be present when your father is examined."

Ah! what would not the baroness have given to follow the priest and her son? But she could not; she understood this, and submitted.

They set out, and as they stepped into the street they saw a soldier a little way from them, who made a friendly gesture.

They recognized Corporal Bavois, and paused.

But he, passing them with an air of the utmost indifference, and apparently without observing them, hastily dropped these words:

"I have seen Chanlouineau. Be of good cheer; he promises to save M. d'Escorval!"

CHAPTER LXX.

In the citadel of Montaignac, within the second line of fortifications, stands an old building known as the chapel.

Originally consecrated to worship, the structure had, at the time of which we write, fallen into disuse. It was so damp that it would not even serve as an arsenal for an artillery regiment, for the guns rusted there more quickly than in the

open air. A black mold covered the walls to a height of six or seven feet.

This was the place selected by the Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu for the assembling of the military commission.

On first entering it, Maurice and the abbe felt a cold chill strike to their very hearts; and an indefinable anxiety paralyzed all their faculties.

But the commission had not yet commenced its *seance;* and they had time to look about them.

The arrangements which had been made in transforming this gloomy hall into a tribunal, attested the precipitancy of the judges and their determination to finish their work promptly and mercilessly.

The arrangements denoted an absence of all form; and one could divine at once the frightful certainty of the result.

Three large tables taken from the mess room, and covered with horse-blankets instead of tapestry, stood upon the platform. Some unpainted wooden chairs awaited the judges; but in the centre glittered the president's chair, a superbly carved and gilded *fauteuil*, sent by the Duke de Sairmeuse.

Several wooden benches had been provided for the prisoners.

Ropes stretched from one wall to the other divided the chapel into two parts. It was a precaution against the public.

A superfluous precaution, alas!

The abbe and Maurice had expected to find the crowd too great for the hall, large as it was, and they found the chapel almost unoccupied.

There were not twenty persons in the building. Standing back in the shadow of the wall were perhaps a dozen men, pale and gloomy, a sullen fire smoldering in their eyes, their teeth tightly clenched. They were army officers retired on half pay. Three men, attired in black, were conversing in low tones near the door. In a corner stood several country-women with their aprons over their faces. They were weeping bitterly, and their sobs alone broke the silence. They were the mothers, wives, or daughters of the accused men.

Nine o'clock sounded. The rolling of the drum made the panes of the only window tremble. A loud voice outside shouted, "Present arms!" The military commission entered, followed by the Marquis de Courtornieu and several civil functionaries.

The duke was in full uniform, his face a little more crimson, and his air a trifle more haughty than usual.

"The session is open!" pronounced the Duke de Sairmeuse, the president.

Then, in a rough voice, he added:

"Bring in the culprits."

He had not even the grace to say "the accused."

They came in, one by one, to the number of twenty, and took their places on the benches at the foot of the platform.

Chanlouineau held his head proudly erect, and looked composedly about him.

Baron d'Escorval was calm and grave; but not more so than when, in days gone by, he had been called upon to express his opinion in the councils of the empire.

Both saw Maurice, who was so overcome that he had to lean upon the abbe for support. But while the baron greeted his son with a simple bend of the head, Chanlouineau made a gesture that clearly signified:

"Have confidence in me—fear nothing."

The attitude of the other prisoners betrayed surprise rather than fear. Perhaps hey were unconscious of the peril they had braved, and the extent of the danger that now threatened them.

When the prisoners had taken their places, the chief counsel for the prosecution rose.

His presentation of the case was characterized by intense violence, but lasted only five minutes. He briefly narrated the facts, exalted the merits of the government, of the Restoration, and concluded by a demand that sentence of death should be pronounced upon the culprits.

When he ceased speaking, the duke, addressing the first prisoner upon the bench, said, rudely:

"Stand up."

The prisoner rose.

"Your name and age?"

"Eugene Michel Chanlouineau, aged twenty-nine, farmer by occupation."

"An owner of national lands, probably?"

"The owner of lands which, having been paid for with good money and made fertile by labor, are rightfully mine."

The duke did not wish to waste time on discussion.

"You have taken part in this rebellion?" he pursued.

"Yes."

"You are right in avowing it, for witnesses will be introduced who will prove this fact conclusively."

Five grenadiers entered; they were the men whom Chanlouineau had held at bay while Maurice, the abbe, and Marie-Anne were entering the carriage.

These soldiers declared upon oath that they recognized the accused; and one of them even went so far as to pronounce a glowing eulogium upon him, declaring him to be a solid fellow, of remarkable courage.

Chanlouineau's eyes during this deposition betrayed an agony of anxiety. Would the soldiers allude to this circum-

stance of the carriage? No; they did not allude to it.

"That is sufficient," interrupted the president.

Then turning to Chanlouineau:

"What were your motives?" he inquired.

"We hoped to free ourselves from a government imposed upon us by foreigners; to free ourselves from the insolence of the nobility, and to retain the lands that were justly ours."

Enough! You were one of the leaders of the revolt?"

"One of the leaders—yes."

"Who were the others?"

"A faint smile flitted over the lips of the young farmer, as he replied:

"The others were M. Lacheneur, his son Jean, and the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

The duke bounded from his gilded arm-chair.

"Wretch!" he exclaimed, "rascal! vile scoundrel!"

He caught up a heavy inkstand that stood upon the table before him: and one would have supposed that he was about to hurl it at the prisoner's head.

Chanlouineau stood perfectly unmoved in the midst of the assembly, which was excited to the highest pitch by his startling declaration.

"You questioned me," he resumed, "and I replied. You may gag me if my responses do not please you. If there were witnesses *for* me as there are against me, I could prove the truth of my words. As it is, all the prisoners here will tell you that I am speaking the truth. Is it not so, you others?"

With the exception of Baron d'Escorval, there was not one prisoner who was capable of understanding the real bearing of these audacious allegations; but all, nevertheless, nodded their assent.

"The Marquis de Sairmeuse was so truly our leader," exclaimed the daring peasant, "that he was wounded by a sabre-thrust while fighting by my side."

The face of the duke was more purple than that of a man struck with apoplexy; and his fury almost deprived him of the power of speech.

"You lie, scoundrel? you lie!" he gasped.

"Send for the marquis," said Chanlouineau, tranquilly, "and see whether or not he is wounded."

A refusal on the part of the duke could not fail to arouse suspicion. But what could he do? Martial had concealed his wound the day before; it was now impossible to confess that he had been wounded.

Fortunately for the duke, one of the judges relieved him of his embarrassment.

"I hope, monsieur, that you will not give this arrogant rebel the satisfaction he desires. The commission opposes his demand."

Chanlouineau laughed loudly.

"Very naturally," he exclaimed. "Tomorrow my head will be off, and you think nothing will then remain to prove what I say. I have another proof, fortunately — material and indestructible proof—which it is beyond your power to destroy, and which will speak when my body is six feet under ground."

"What is this proof?" demanded another judge upon whom the duke looked askance.

The prisoner shook his head.

"I will give it to you when you offer me my life in exchange for it," he replied. "It is now in the hands of a trusty person, who knows its value. It will go to the king if necessary. We would like to understand the part which the Marquis de Sairmeuse has played in this affair—whether he was truly with us, or whether he was only an instigating agent."

A tribunal regardful of the immutable rules of justice, or even of its own honor, would, by virtue of its discretionary powers, have instantly demanded the presence of the Marquis de Sairmeuse.

But the military commission considered such a course quite beneath its dignity.

These men arrayed in gorgeous uniforms were not judges charged with the vindication of a cruel law, but still a law—they were the instruments commissioned by the conquerors to strike the vanquished in the name of that savage code which may be summoned up in two words: "*vae victis.*"

The president, the noble Duke de Sairmeuse, would not have consented to summon Martial on any consideration. Nor did his associate judges wish him to do so.

Had Chanlouineau forseen this? Probably. Yet, why had he ventured so hazardous a blow.

The tribunal, after a short deliberation, decided that it would not admit this testimony which had so excited the audience, and stupefied Maurice and Abbe Midon.

The examination was continued, therefore, with increased bitterness.

"Instead of designating imaginary leaders," resumed the duke, "you would do well to name the real instigator of this revolt—not Lacheneur, but an individual seated upon the other end of the bench, the elder d'Escorval——"

"Monsieur le Baron d'Escorval was entirely ignorant of the conspiracy, I swear it by all that I hold most sacred——"

"Hold your tongue!" interrupted the counsel for the prosecution. "Instead of wearying the patience of the commis-

sion by such ridiculous stories, try to merit its indulgence."

Chanlouineau's glance and gesture expressed such disdain that the man who interrupted him was abashed.

"I wish no indulgence," he said. "I have played, I have lost; here is my head. But if you were not more cruel than wild beasts you would take pity on the poor wretches who surround me. I see at least ten among them who were not our accomplices, and who certainly did not take up arms. Even the others did not know what they were doing. No, they did not!"

Having spoken, he resumed his seat, proud, indifferent, and apparently oblivious to the murmur which ran through the audience, the soldiers of the guard and even to the platform, at the sound of his vibrant voice.

The despair of the poor peasant women had been reawakened, and their sobs and moans filled the immense hall.

The retired officers had grown even more pale and gloomy; and tears streamed down the wrinkled cheeks of several.

"That one is a man!" they were thinking.

The abbe leaned over and whispered in the ear of Maurice:

"Evidently Chanlouineau has some plan. He intends to save your father. How, I cannot understand."

The judges were conversing in low tones with considerable animation.

A difficulty had presented itself.

The prisoners, ignorant of the charges which would be brought against them, and not expecting instant trial, had not thought of procuring a defender.

And this circumstance, bitter mockery! frightened this iniquitous tribunal, which did not fear to trample beneath its feet the most sacred rules of justice.

The judges had decided; their verdict was, as it were, rendered in advance, and yet they wished to hear a voice raised in defense of those who were already doomed.

It chanced that three lawyers, retained by the friends of several of the prisoners, were in the hall.

They were the three men that Maurice, on his entrance, had noticed conversing near the door of the chapel.

The duke was informed of this fact. He turned to them, and motioned them to approach; then, pointing to Chanlouineau:

"Will you undertake this culprit's defense?" he demanded.

For a moment the lawyers made no response. This monstrous *seance* had aroused a storm of indignation and disgust within their breasts, and they looked questioning at each other.

"We are all disposed to undertake the prisoner's defense," at last replied the eldest of the three; "but we see him for the first time; we are ignorant of his grounds of defense. He must ask a delay; it is indispensable, in order to confer with him."

"The court can grant you no delay," interrupted M. de Sairmeuse; "will you accept the defense, yes, or no?"

The advocate hesitated, not that he was afraid, for he was a brave man: but he was endeavoring to find some argument strong enough to trouble the conscience of these judges.

"I will speak in his behalf," said the advocate, at last, "but not without first protesting with all my strength against these unheard of modes of procedure."

"Oh! spare us your homilies, and be brief."

After Chanlouineau's examination, it was difficult to improvise there, on the spur of the moment, a plea in his behalf. Still, his courageous advocate, in his indignation, presented a score of arguments which would have made any other tribunal reflect.

But all the while he was speaking the Duke de Sairmeuse fidgeted in his gilded arm-chair with every sign of angry impatience.

"The plea was very long," he remarked, when the lawyer had concluded, "terribly long. We shall never get through with this business if each prisoner takes up as much time!"

He turned to his colleagues as if to consult them, but suddenly changing his mind he propoed to the prosecuting counsel that he should unite all the cases, try all the culprits in a body, with the exception of the elder D'Escorval.

"This will shorten our task, for, in case we adopt this course, there will be but two judgments to be pronounced," he said. "This will not of course, prevent each individual from defending himself."

The lawyers protested against this. A judgment, in a lump, like that suggested by the duke, would destroy all hope of saving a single one of these unfortunate men from the guillotine.

"How can we defend them," the lawyers pleaded, "when we know nothing of the situation of each of the prisoners? we do not even know their names. We shall be obliged to designate them by the cut of their coats and by the color of their hair."

They implored the tribunal to grant them a week for preparation, four days, even twenty-four hours. Futile efforts! The president's proposition was adopted.

Consequently, each prisoner was called to the desk according to the places which he occupied upon the benches. Each man gave his name, his age, his abode, and his profession, and received an order to return to his place.

Six or seven prisoners were actually granted time to say that they were absolutely ignorant of the conspiracy, and that they had been arrested while conversing quietly upon the public highway. They begged to be allowed to furnish proof of the truth of their assertions—they invoked the testimony of the soldiers who had arrested them.

M. d'Escorval, whose case had been separated from the others, was not summoned to the desk. He would be interrogated last.

"Now the counsel for the defense will be heard," said the duke; "but make haste; lose no time! It is already twelve o'clock."

Then began a shameful, revolting and unheard of scene. The duke interrupted the lawyers every other moment, bidding them be silent, questioning them, or jeering at them.

"It seems incredible," said he, "that any one can think of defending such wretches!"

Or again:

"Silence! You should blush with shame for having constituted yourself the defender of such rascals!"

But the lawyers persevered even while they realized the utter uselessness of their efforts. But what could they do under such circumstances? The defense of these twenty-nine prisoners lasted only one hour and a half.

Before the last word was fairly uttered, the Duke de Sairmeuse gave a sigh of relief, and in a tone which betrayed his delight, said:

"Prisoner Escorval, stand up."

Thus called upon, the baron rose, calm and dignified. Terrible as his sufferings must have been, there was no trace of it upon his noble face.

He had even repressed the smile of disdain which the duke's paltry affection in not giving him the title which belonged to him, brought to his lips.

But Chanlouineau sprang up at the same time, trembling with indignation, his face all aglow with anger.

"Remain seated," ordered the duke, "or you shall be removed from the court-room.

Chanlouineau, nevertheless, declared that he would speak: that he had some remarks to add to the plea made by the defending counsel.

Upon a sign from the duke, two gendarmes approached and placed their hands upon his shoulders. He allowed them to force him back into his seat, though he could easily have crushed them with one pressure of his brawny arm.

An observer would have supposed that he was furious; secretly, he was delighted. The aim he had had in view was now attained. In the glance he cast upon the abbe, the latter could read:

"Whatever happens, watch over Maurice; restrain him. Do not allow him to defeat my plans by any outbreak."

This caution was not unnecessary. Maurice was terribly agitated; he could not see, he felt that he was suffocating, that he was losing his reason.

"Where is the self-control you promised me?" murmured the priest.

But no one observed the young man's condition. The attention was rapt, breathless. So profound was the silence that the measued tread of the sentinels without could be distinctly heard.

Each person present felt that the decisive moment for which the tribunal had reserved all its attention and efforts had come.

To convict and condemn the poor peasants, of whom no one would think twice, was a mere trifle. But to bring low an illustrious man who had been the counsellor and faithful friend of the emperor! What glory, and what an opportunity for the ambitious.

The instinct of the audience spoke the truth. If the tribunal had acted informally in the case of the obscure conspirators, it had carefully prepared its suit against the baron.

Thanks to the activity of the Marquis de Courtornieu, the prosecution had found seven charges against the baron, the least grave of which was punishable by death.

"Which of you," demanded M. de Sairmeuse, "will consent to defend this great culprit?"

"I!" exclaimed three advocates, in a breath.

"Take care," said the duke, with a malicious smile; "the task is—not light."

"Not light!" It would have been better to say dangerous. It would have been better to say that the defender risked his career, his peace and his liberty, very probably—his life.

"Our profession has its exigencies," nobly replied the oldest of the advocates.

And the three courageously took their places beside the baron, thus avenging the honor of their robe which had just been miserably sullied, in a city where, among more than a hundred thousand souls, two pure and innocent victims of a furious reaction had not—oh, shame!—been able to find a defender.

"Prisoner," resumed M. de Sairmeuse, "state your name and profession."

"Louis Guillaume, Baron d'Escorval, Commander of the Order of the Legion of Honor, formerly Councillor of State under the Empire."

"So you avow these shameful services? You confess——"

"Pardon, monsieur; I am proud of having had the honor of serving my country, and of being useful to her in proportion to my ability——"

With a furious gesture the duke interrupted him.

"That is excellent!" he exclaimed. "These gentlemen, the commissioners, will appreciate that. It was, undoubtedly, in the hope of regaining your former position that you entered into a conspiracy against a magnanimous prince with these vile wretches!"

"These peasants are not vile wretches, but misguided men, monsieur. Moreover, you know—yes, you know as well as I do myself—that I have had no hand in this conspiracy."

"You were arrested in the ranks of the conspirators with weapons in your hands!"

"I was unarmed, monsieur, as you are well aware; and if I was among the peasantry, it was only because I hoped to induce them to relinquish their senseless enterprise."

"You lie!"

The baron paled beneath the insult, but he made no reply.

There was, however, one man in the assemblage who could no longer endure this horrible and abominable injustice, and this man was Abbe Midon, who, only a moment before, had advised Maurice to be calm.

He brusquely quitted his place, and advanced to the foot of the platform.

"The Baron d'Escorval speaks the truth," he cried, in a ringing voice: "the three hundred prisoners in the citadel will swear to it, these prisoners here would say the same if they stood upon the guillotine; and I, who accompanied him, who walked beside him, I, a priest, swear before the God who will judge all men, Monsieur de Sairmeuse, I swear that all which it was in human power to do to arrest this movement we have done!"

The duke listened with an ironical smile.

"They did not deceive me then, when they told me that this army of rebels had a chaplain! Ah! monsieur, you should sink to the earth with shame. You, a priest, mingle with such scoundrels as these—with these enemies of our good king and of our holy religion! Do not deny this! Your haggard features, your swollen eyes, your disordered attire soiled with dust and mud betray your guilt. Must I, a soldier, remind you of what is due your sacred calling? Hold your peace, monsieur, and depart!"

The counsel for the prisoner sprang up.

"We demand," they cried, "that this witness be heard. He must be heard! Military commisions are not above the laws that regulate ordinary tribunals."

"If I do not speak the truth," resumed the abbe, "I am a perjured witness, worse yet, an accomplice. It is your duty, in that case, to have me arrested."

The duke's face expressed a hypocritical compassion.

"No, Monsieur le Cure," said he, "I shall not arrest you. I would avert the scandal which you are trying to cause. We will show your priestly garb the respect the wearer does not deserve. Again, and for the last time, retire, or I shall be obliged to employ force."

What would further resistance avail? Nothing. The abbe, with a face whiter than the plastered walls, and eyes filled with tears, came back to his place beside Maurice.

The lawyers, meanwhile, were uttering their protests with increasing energy. But the duke, by a prolonged hammering upon the table with his fists, at last succeeded in reducing them to silence.

"Ah! you wish testimony!" he exclaimed. "Very well, you shall have it. Soldiers, bring in the first witness."

A movement among the guards, and almost immediately Chupin appeared. He advanced deliberately, but his countenance betrayed him. A close observer could have read his anxiety and his terror in his eyes, which wandered restlessly about the room.

And there was a very appreciable terror in his voice when, with hand uplifted, he swore to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

"What do you know regarding the prisoner d'Escorval?" demanded the duke.

"I know that he took part in the rebellion on the night of the fourth."

"Are you sure of this?"

"I can furnish proofs."

"Submit them to the consideration of the commission."

The old scoundrel began to gain more confidence.

"First," he replied, "it was to the house of M. d'Escorval that Lacheneur hastened after he had, much against his will, restored to M. le Duc the chateau of M. le Duc's ancestors. M. Lacheneur met Chanlouineau there, and from that day dates the plot of this insurrection.

"I was Lacheneur's friend," said the baron; "it was perfectly natural that he should come to me for consolation after a great misfortune."

M. de Sairmeuse turned to his colleague.

"You hear that!" said he. "This D'Escorval calls the restitution of a deposit a great misfortune! Go on, witness."

"In the second place," resumed Chupin, "the accused was always prowling about Lacheneur's house."

"That is false," interrupted the baron. "I never visited the house but once, and on that occasion I implored him to renounce."

He paused, comprehending only when

it was too late, the terrible significance of his words. But having begun, he would not retract, and he added:

"I implored him to renounce this project of an insurrection."

"Ah! then you knew his wicked intentions?"

"I suspected them."

"Not to reveal a conspiracy, makes one an accomplice, and means the guillotine."

Baron d'Escorval had just signed his death-warrant.

Strange caprice of destiny! He was innocent, and yet he was the only one among the accused whom a regular tribunal could have legally condemned.

Maurice and the abbe were prostrated with grief; but Chanlouineau, who turned towards them, had still upon his lips a smile of confidence.

How could he hope when all hope seemed absolutely lost?

But the commissioners made no attempt to conceal their satisfaction. M. de Sairmeuse, especially, evinced an indecent joy.

"Ah, well! messieurs?" he said to the lawyers, in a sneering tone.

The counsel for the defense poorly dissimulated their discouragement; but they nevertheless endeavored to question the validity of such a declaration on the part of their client. He had said that he *suspected* the conspiracy, not that he *knew* it. It was quite a different thing.

"Say at once that you wish still more overwhelming evidence," interrupted the duke. "Very well! You shall have it. Continue your deposition, witness."

"The accused," continued Chupin, "was present at all the conferences held at Lacheneur's house. The proof of this is as clear as day-light. Being obliged to cross the Oiselle to reach the Reche, and fearing the ferryman would notice his frequent nocturnal voyages, the baron had an old boat repaired which he had not used for years."

"Ah! that is a remarkable circumstance, prisoner; do you recollect having your boat repaired?"

"Yes; but not for the purpose which this man mentions."

"For what purpose, then?"

The baron made no response. Was it not in compliance with the request of Maurice that the boat had been put in order?

"And finally," continued Chupin, "when Lacheneur set fire to his house to give the signal for the insurrection, the prisoner was with him."

"That," exclaimed the duke, "is conclusive evidence."

"It was, indeed, at the Reche," interrupted the baron; "but it was, as I have already told you, with the firm determination of preventing this outbreak."

M. de Sairmeuse gave utterance to a little disdainful laugh.

"Ah, gentlemen!" he said, addressing the commissioners, "can you not see that the prisoner's courage does not equal his depravity? But I will confound him. What did you do, prisoner, when the insurgents left the Reche?"

"I returned to my home with all possible haste, took a horse and repaired to the Croix-d'Arcy."

"Then you knew that this was the spot appointed for the general rendezvous?"

"Lacheneur had just informed me."

"If I believed your story, I should tell you that it was your duty to have hastened to Montaignac and informed the authorities. But what you say is untrue. You did not leave Lacheneur, you accompanied him."

"No, monsieur, no!"

And what if I could prove this fact beyond all question?"

"Impossible, monsieur, since such was not the case."

By the malicious satisfaction that lighted M. de Sairmeuse's face, the abbe knew that this wicked judge had some terible weapon in his hands, and that baron d'Escorval was about to be overwhelmed by one of those fatal coincidences which explain, although they do not justify, judicial errors.

At a sign from the counsel for the prosecution, the Marquis de Courtornieu left his seat and came forward to the platform.

"I must request you, Monsieur le Marquis," said the duke, "to have the goodness to read to the commission the deposition written and signed by your daughter."

This scene must have been prepared in advance for the audience. M. de Courtornieu cleaned his glasses, drew from his pocket a paper which he unfolded, and amid a death-like silence, he read:

"I, Blanche de Courtornieu, do declare upon oath that, on the evening of the fourth of February, between ten and eleven o'clock, on the public road leading from Sairmeuse to Montaignac, I was assailed by a crowd of armed brigands. While they were deliberating as to whether they should take possession of my person and pillage my carriage, I overheard one of these men say to another, speaking of me: 'She must get out, must she not, M. d'Escorval?' I believe that the brigand who uttered these words was a peasant named Chanlouineau, but I dare not assert it on oath."

A terrible cry, followed by inarticulate moans, interrupted the marquis.

The suffering which Maurice endured was too great for his strength and his reason. He was about to spring forward and cry:

"It was I who addressed those words

to Chanlouineau. I alone am guilty; my father is innocent!"

But fortunately the abbe had the presence of mind to hold him back, and place his hand over the poor youth's lips.

But the priest would not have been able to restrain Maurice without the aid of the retired army officers, who were standing beside him.

Divining all, perhaps, they surrounded Maurice, took him up, and carried him from the room by main force, in spite of his violent resistance.

All this occupied scarcely ten seconds.

"What is the cause of this disturbance!" inquired the duke, looking angrily over the audience.

No one uttered a word.

"At the least noise the hall sha l be cleared," added M. de Sairmeuse. And you, prisoner, what have you to say in self-justification, after this crushing accusation by Mlle. de Courtornieu?"

"Nothing," murmured the baron.

"So you confess your guilt?"

Once outside, the abbe confided Maurice to the care of three officers, who promised to go with him, to carry him by main force, if need be, to the hotel, and keep him there.

Relieved on this score, the priest re-entered the hall just in time to see the baron seat himself without making any response thus indicating that he had relinquished all intention of defending his life.

Really, what could he say? How could he defend himself without betraying his son?

Until now there had not been one person who did not believe in the baron's entire innocence. Could it be that he was guilty? His silence must be accepted as a confession of guilt; at least, some present believed so.

Baron d'Escorval appeared to be guilty. Was that not a sufficiently great victory for the Duke de Sairmeuse?

He turned to the lawyers, and with an air of weariness and disdain he said:

"Now speak, since it is absolutely necessary; but no long phrases! We should have finished here an hour ago."

The oldest lawyer rose, trembling with indignation, ready to dare anything for the sake of giving free utterance to his thought, but the baron checked him.

"Do not try to defend me," he said, calmly; "it would be labor wasted. I have only a word to say to my judges. Let them remember what the noble and generous Marshal Moncey wrote to the king: 'The scaffold does not make friends.'"

This recollection was not of a nature to soften the hearts of the judges. The marshal, for that saying, had been deprived of his office, and condemned to three months' imprisonment.

As the advocates made no futher attempt to argue the case, the commission retired to deliberate. This gave M. d'Escorval an opportunity to speak with his defenders. He shook them warmly by the hand, and thanked them for their devotion and for their courage.

The good man wept.

Then the baron, turning to the oldest among them, quickly and in a low voice said:

"I have a last favor to ask of you. When the sentence of death shall have been pronounced upon me, go at once to my son. You will say to him that his dying father commands him to live—he will understand you. Tell him it is my last wish; that he live—live for his mother!"

He said no more; the judges were returning.

Of the thirty prisoners, nine were declared not guilty, and released.

The remaining twenty-one, and M. d'Escorval and Chanlouineau were among the number, were condemned to death.

But the smile had not once forsaken Chanlouineau's lips.

CHAPTER LXXI.

THE abbe had been right in feeling he could trust the officers to whose care he had confided Maurice.

Finding their entreaties would not induce him to leave the citadel, they seized him and literally carried him away. He made the most desperate efforts to escape: each step was a struggle.

"Leave me!" he exclaimed; "let me go where duty calls me. You only dishonor me in pretending to save me."

His agony was terrible. He had thrown himself headlong into this absurd undertaking, and now the responsibility of his acts had fallen upon his father. He, the culprit, would live, and his innocent father would perish on the guillotine. It was to this, his love for Marie-Anne had led him, that radiant love which in other days had smiled so joyously.

But our capacity for suffering has its limits.

When they had carried him to the room in the hotel where his mother and Marie-Anne were waiting in agonized surprise, that irresistible torpor which follows suffering too intense for human endurance, crept over him.

"Nothing is decided yet," the officers answered in response to Mme. d'Escorval's questions. "The cure will hasten here as soon as the verdict is rendered."

Then, as they had promised not to lose sight of Maurice, they seated themselves in gloomy silence.

The house was silent. One might have supposed the hotel deserted. At last, a little before four o clock, the abbe came

in, followed by the lawyer to whom the baron had confided his last wishes.

"My husband!" exclaimed Mme. d'Escorval, springing wildly from her chair.

The priest bowed his head; she understood.

"Death!" she faltered. "They have condemned him!"

And overcome by the terrible blow, she sank back, inert, with hanging arms.

But the weakness did not last long; she again sprang up, her eyes brilliant with heroic resolve.

"We must save him!" she exclaimed. "We must wrest him from the scaffold. Up, Maurice! up, Marie-Anne! No more weak lamentations, we must to work! You, also, gentlemen, will aid me. I can count upon your assistance, Monsieur le Cure. What are we going to do? I do not know! But something must be done. The death of this just man would be too great a crime. God will not permit it."

She suddenly paused, with clasped hands, and eyes uplifted to heaven, as if seeking divine inspiration.

"And the king," she resumed—"will the king consent to such a crime? No. A king can refuse mercy, but he cannot refuse justice. I will go to him. I will tell him all! Why did not this thought come to me sooner? We must start for Paris without losing an instant. Maurice, you will accompany me. One of you gentlemen will go at once and order post-horses."

Thinking they would obey her, she hastened into the next room to make preparations for her journey.

"Poor woman!" the lawyer whispered to the abbe, "she does not know that the sentence of a military commission is executed in twenty-four hours."

"Well?"

"It requires four days to make the journey to Paris."

He reflected a moment, then added:

"But, after all, to let her go would be an act of mercy. Did not Ney, on the morning of his execution, implore the king to order the removal of his wife who was sobbing and moaning in his cell.'

The abbe shook his head.

"No," said he; "Mme. d'Escorval will never forgive us if we prevented her from receiving her husband's last farewell."

She, at that very moment, re-entered the room, and the priest was trying to gather courage to tell her the cruel truth, when some one knocked violently at the door.

One of the officers went to open it, and Bavois, the corporal of grenadiers, entered, his right hand lifted to h s cap, as if he were in the presence of his superior officer.

"Is Mlle. Lacheneur here?" he demanded.

Marie-Anne came forward.

"I am she, monsieur," she replied; "what do you desire of me?"

"I am ordered, mademoiselle, to conduct you to the citadel."

"Ah! exclaimed Maurice, in a ferocious tone; "so they imprison women also!"

The worthy corporal struck himself a heavy blow upon the forehead.

"I am an old stupid!" he exclaimed, "and express myself badly. I meant to say that I came to seek mademoiselle at the request of one of the condemned, a man named Chanlouineau, who desires to speak with her."

"Impossible, my good man," said one of the officers; "they would not allow this lady to visit one of the condemned without special permission——"

"Well, she has this permission," said the old soldier.

Assuring himself, with a glance, that he had nothing to fear from any one present, he added, in lower tones:

"This Chanlouineau told me that the cure would understand his reasons."

Had the brave peasant really found some means of salvation. The abbe almost began to believe it.

"You must go with this worthy man, Marie-Anne," said he.

The poor girl shuddered at the thought of seeing Chanlouineau again, but the idea of refusing never once occurred to her.

"Let us go," she said, quietly.

But the corporal did not stir from his place, and winking, according to his habit when he desired to attract the attention of his hearers:

"In one moment," he said. "This Chanlouineau, who seems to be a shrewd fellow, told me to tell you that all was going well. May I be hung if I can see how! Still such is his opinion. He also told me to tell you not to stir from this place. and not to attempt anything until mademoiselle returns, which will be in less than an hour. He swears to you that he will keep his promise; he only asks you to pledge your word that you will obey him——"

"We will take no action until an hour has passed," said the abbe. "I promise that——"

"That is all. Salute company. And now, mademoiselle, on the double-quick, march! The poor devil over there must be on coals of fire."

That a condemned prisoner should be allowed to receive a visit from the daughter of the leader of the rebellion—of that Lacheneur who had succeeded in making his escape—was indeed surprising.

But Chanlouineau had been ingenious enough to discover a means of procuring this special permission.

With this aim in view, when sentence of death was passed upon him, he pretended to be overcome with terror, and to weep piteously.

The soldiers could scarcely believe their eyes when they saw this robust young fellow, who had been so insolent and defiant a few hours before, so overcome that they were obliged to carry him to his cell.

There, his lamentations were redoubled; and he begged the guard to go to the Duke de Sairmeuse, or the Marquis de Courtornieu, and tell them he had revelations of the greatest importance to make.

That potent word "revelations," made M. de Courtornieu hasten to the prisoner's cell.

He found Chanlouineau on his knees. his features distorted by what was apparently an agony of fear. The man dragged himself towards him, took his hands and kissed them, imploring mercy and forgiveness, swearing that to preserve his life he was ready to do anything, yes, anything, even to deliver up M. Lacheneur.

To capture Lacheneur! Such a prospect had powerful attractions for the Marquis de Courtornieu.

"Do you know, then, where this brigand is concealed?" he inquired.

Chanlouineau admitted that he did not know, but declared that Marie-Anne, Lacheneur's daughter, knew her father's hiding-place. She had, he declared, perfect confidence in him; and if they would only send for her, and allow him ten minutes private conversation with her, he was sure he could obtain the secret of her father's place of concealment. So the bargain was quickly concluded.

The prisoner's life was promised him in exchange for the life of Lacheneur.

A soldier, who chanced to be Corporal Bavois, was sent to summon Marie-Anne.

And Chanlouineau waited in terrible anxiety. No one had told him what had taken place at Escorval, but he divined it by the aid of that strange prescience which so often illuminates the mind when death is near at hand.

He was almost certain that Mme. d'Escorval was in Montaignac; he was equally certain that Marie-Anne was with her, and if she were, he knew that she would come.

And he waited counting the seconds by the throbbings of his heart.

He waited, understanding the cause of every sound without, distinguishing with the marvelous acuteness of senses excited to the highest pitch by passion, sounds which would have been inaudible to another person.

At last, at the end of the corridor, he heard the rustling of a dress against the wall.

"It is she," he murmured.

Footsteps approached; the heavy bolts were drawn back, the door opened, and Marie-Anne entered, accompanied by Corporal Bavois.

"M. de Courtornieu promised me that we should be left alone!" exclaimed Chanlouineau.

"Therefore, I go at once," replied the old soldier. "But I have orders to return for mademoiselle in half an hour."

When the door closed behind the worthy corporal, Chanlouineau took Marie-Anne's hand and drew her to the tiny grated window.

"Thank you for coming," said he "thank you. I can see you and speak to you once more. Now that my hours are numbered, I may reveal the secret of my soul and of my life. Now, I can venture to tell you how ardently I have loved you—how much I still love you."

Involuntarily Marie-Anne drew away her hand and stepped back.

This outburst of passion, at such a moment, seemed at once unspeakably sad and frightful.

"Have I, then, offended you?" said Chanlouineau, sadly. "Forgive one who is about to die! You cannot refuse to listen to the voice of one, who after tomorrow, will have vanished from earth forever.

"I have loved you for a long time, Marie-Anne, for more than six years. Before I saw you, I loved only my possessions. To raise fine crops, and to amass a fortune, seemed to me, then, the greatest possible happiness here below.

"Why did I meet you? But at that time you were so high, and I, so low, that never in my wildest dreams did I aspire to you. I went to church each Sunday only that I might worship you as peasant women worship the Blessed Virgin; I went home with my eyes and my heart full of you—and that was all.

"Then came the misfortune that brought us nearer to each other; and your father made me as insane, yes, as insane as himself.

"After the insults he received from the Sairmeuse, your father resolved to revenge himself upon these arrogant nobles, and he selected me for his accomplice. He had read my heart. On leaving the house of Baron d'Escorval, on that Sunday evening, which you must remember, the compact that bound me to your father was made.

" 'You love my daughter, my boy,' said he. 'Very well, aid me, and I promise you, in case we succeed, she shall be your wife. Only,' he added, 'I must warn you that you hazard your life.' "

"But what was life in comparison with the hope that dazzled me! From that

night, I gave body, soul, and fortune to the cause. Others were influenced by hatred, or by ambition; but I was actuated by neither of these motives.

"What did the quarrels of the great matter to me—a simple laborer? I knew that the greatest were powerless to give my crops a drop of rain in season of drought, or a ray of sunshine during the rain.

"I took part in this conspiracy because I loved you——"

"Ah! you are cruel!" exclaimed Marie-Anne, "you are pitiless!"

It seemed to the poor girl that he was reproaching her for the horrible fate which Lacheneur had brought upon him, and for the terrible part which her father had imposed upon her, and which she had not been strong enough to refuse to perform.

But Chanlouineau scarcely heard Marie-Anne's exclamation. All the bitterness of the past had mounted to his brain like fumes of alcohol. He was scarcely conscious of his own words.

"But the day soon came," he continued, "when my foolish illusions were destroyed. You could not be mine since you belonged to another. I might have broken my compact! I thought of doing so, but had not the courage. To see you, to hear your voice, to dwell beneath the same roof with you, was happiness. I longed to see you happy and honored; I fought for the triumph of another, for him whom you had chosen——"

A sob that had risen in his throat choked his utterance; he buried his face in his hands to hide his tears, and, for a moment, seemed completely overcome.

But he mastered his weakness after a little, and in a firm voice, he said:

"We must not linger over the past. Time flies, and the future is ominous."

As he spoke, he went to the door and applied first his eye, then his ear to the opening, to see that there were no spies without.

No one was in the corridor; he could not hear a sound.

He came back to Marie-Anne's side, and tearing the sleeve of his jacket open with his teeth, he drew from it two letters, wrapped carefully in a piece of cloth.

"Here," he said, in a low voice, "is a man's life!"

Marie-Anne knew nothing of Chanlouineau's promises and hopes, and bewildered by her distress, she did not at first understand.

"This," she exclaimed, "is a man's life!"

"Hush, speak lower!" interrupted Chanlouineau. "Yes, one of these letters might, perhaps, save the life of one who has been condemned to death."

"Unfortunate man! Why do you not make use of it and save yourself?"

The young man sadly shook his head.

"Is it possible that you could ever love me?" he said, simply. "No, it is not. I have, therefore, no desire to live. Rest beneath the sod is preferable to the misery I am forced to endure. Moreover, I was justly condemned. I knew what I was doing when I left the Reche with my gun upon my shoulder, and my sword by my side; I have no right to complain. But those cruel judges have condemned an innocent man——"

"Baron d'Escorval?"

"Yes—the father of—Maurice!"

His voice changed in uttering the name of this man, for whose happiness he would have given ten lives had they been his to give.

"I wish to save him," he added, "I can do it."

"Oh! if what you said were true? But you undoubtedly deceive yourself."

"I know what I am saying."

Fearing that some spy outside would overhear him, he came close to Marie-Anne and said rapidly, and in a low voice:

"I never believed in the success of this conspiracy. When I sought for a weapon of defense in case of failure, the Marquis de Sairmeuse furnished it. When it became necessary to send a circular, warning our accomplices of the date decided upon for the uprising, I persuaded M. Martial to write a model. He suspected nothing. I told him it was for a wedding; he did what I asked. This letter, which is now in my possession, is the rough draft of the circular; and it was written by the hand of the Marquis de Sairmeuse. It is impossible for him to deny it. There is an erasure on each line. Every one would regard it as the handiwork of a man who was seeking to convey his real meaning in ambiguous phrases.

Chanlouineau opened the envelope and showed her the famous letter which he had dictated, and in which the space for the date of the insurrection was left blank.

"My dear friend, we are at last agreed, and the marriage is decided, etc."

The light that had sparkled in Marie-Anne's eye was suddenly extinguished.

"And you believe that this letter can be of any service?" she inquired, in evident discouragement.

"I do not *think* it!"

"But——"

With a gesture, he interrupted her.

"We must not lose time in discussion—listen to me. Of itself, this letter might be unimportant, but I have arranged matters in such a way that it will produce a powerful effect. I declared before the commission that the Marquis de Sairmeuse was one of the leaders of the movement. They laughed; and I

read incredulity on the faces of the judges. But calumny is never without its effect. When the Duke de Sairmeuse is about to receive a reward for his services, there will be enemies in plenty to remember and to repeat my words. He knew this so well that he was greatly agitated, even while his colleagues sneered at my accusation."

"To accuse a man falsely is a great crime," murmured the honest Marie-Anne.

"Yes, but I wish to save my friend, and I cannot choose my means. I was all the more sure of success as I knew that the marquis had been wounded. I declared that he was fighting against the troops by my side; I demanded that he should be summoned before the tribunal; I told them that I had in my possession unquestionable proofs of his complicity."

"Did you say that the Marquis de Sairmeuse had been wounded?" inquired Marie-Anne.

Chanlouineau's face betrayed the most intense astonishment.

"What!" he exclaimed, "you do not know——"

Then after an instant's reflection:

"Fool that I am!" he resumed. "Who could have told you what had happened? You remember that when we were travelling over the Sairmeuse road on our way to Croix-d'Arcy, and after your father had left us to ride on in advance, Maurice placed himself at the head of one division, and you walked beside him, while your brother Jean and myself staid behind to urge on the laggards. We were performing our duty conscientiously, when suddenly we heard the gallop of a horse behind us. 'We must know who is coming,' Jean said to me.

"We paused. The horse soon reached us; we caught the bridle and held him. Can you guess who the rider was? Martial de Sairmeuse.

"To describe your brother's fury on recognizing the marquis would be impossible."

"At last I find you, wretched noble!" he exclaimed, 'and now we will settle our account! After reducing my father, who has just given you a fortune, to despair and penury, you have tried to degrade my sister. I will have my revenge! Down, we must fight!' "

Marie-Anne could scarcely tell whether she was awake or dreaming.

"My brother," she murmured, "has challenged the marquis! Is it possible?"

"Brave as M. Martial is," pursued Chanlouineau, "he did not seem inclined to accept the invitation. He stammered out something like this: 'You are mad—you are jesting—have we not always been friends? What does this mean?'

"Jean ground his teeth in rage. 'This means that we have endured your insulting familiarity long enough,' he replied, 'and if you do not dismount and meet me in open combat, I will blow your brains out!'

"Your brother, as he spoke, manipulated his pistol in so threatening a manner that the marquis dismounted, and addressing me:

" 'You see, Chanlouineau,' he said, 'I must fight a duel or submit to assassination. If Jean kills me there is no more to be said—but if I kill him, what is to be done?'

"I told him he would be free to depart on condition he would give me his word not to return to Montaignac before two o'clock.

" 'Then I accept the challenge,' said he, 'give me a weapon.'

"I gave him my sword, your brother drew his, and they took their places in the middle of the highway."

The young farmer paused to take breath, then said, more slowly:

"Marie-Anne, your father and I have misjudged your brother. Poor Jean's appearance is terribly against him. His face indicates a treacherous, cowardly nature, his smile is cunning, and his eyes always shun yours. We have distrusted him, but we should ask his pardon. A man who fights as I saw him fight, is deserving of confidence. For this combat in the public road, and in the darkness of the night, was terrible. They attacked each other silently but furiously. At last Jean fell."

"Ah! my brother is dead!" exclaimed Marie-Anne.

"No," responded Chanlouineau; "at least we have reason to hope not; and I know he has not lacked any attention. This duel had another witness, a man named Poignot, whom you must remember; he was one of your father's tenants. He took Jean, promising me that he would conceal him and care for him.

"As for the marquis, he showed me that he too was wounded, and then he remounted his horse, saying:

" 'What could I do? He would have it so.' "

Marie-Anne understood now.

"Give me the letter," she said to Chanlouineau, "I will go to the duke. I will find some way to reach him, and then God will tell me what course to pursue."

The noble peasant handed the girl the tiny scrap of paper which might have been his own salvation.

"On no account," said he, "must you allow the duke to suppose that you have upon your person the proof with which you threaten him. Who knows of what he might be capable under such circumstances? He will say, at first, that he can do nothing—that he sees no way to save the baron. You will tell him that he must find a means, if he does not wish

this letter sent to Paris, to one of his enemies———"

He paused; he heard the grating of the bolt. Corporal Bavois reappeared.

"The half-hour expired ten minutes ago," he said, sadly. "I have my orders."

"Coming," said Chanlouineau; all is ended!"

And handing Marie-Anne the second letter:

"This is for you," he added. "You will read it when I am no more. Pray, pray, do not weep thus! Be brave! You will soon be the wife of Maurice. And when you are happy, think sometimes of the poor peasant who loved you so much."

Marie-Anne cou'd not utter a word, but she lifted her face to his.

"Ah! I dared not ask it!" he exclaimed.

And for the first time he clasped her in his arms and pressed his lips to her pallid cheek.

"Now adieu," he said once more. "Do not lose a moment. Adieu!"

CHAPTER LXXII.

THE prospect of capturing Lacheneur, the chief conspirator, excited the Marquis de Courtornieu so much that he had not been able to tear himself away from the citadel to return home to his dinner.

Remaining near the entrance of the dark corridor leading to Chanlouineau's cell, he watched Marie-Anne depart; but as he saw her go out into the twilight with a quick, alert step, he felt a sudden doubt of Chanlouineau's sincerity.

"Can it be that this miserable peasant has deceived me?" he thought.

So strong was this suspicion that he hastened after her, determined to question her—to ascertain the truth—to arrest her, if necessary.

But he no longer possessed the agility of youth, and when he reached the gateway the guard told him that Mlle. Lacheneur had already passed out. He rushed out after her, looked about on every side, but could see no trace of her. He re-entered the citadel, furious with himself for his own credulity.

"Still, I can visit Chanlouineau," thought he, "and to-morrow will be time enough to summon this creature and question her."

"This creature" was even then hastening up the long, ill-paved street that led to the Hotel de France.

Regardless of self, and of the curious gaze of a few passers-by, she ran on, thinking only of shortening the terrible anxiety which her friends at the hotel must be enduring.

"All is not lost!" she exclaimed, on re-entering the room.

"My God, Thou hast heard my prayers!" murmured the baroness.

Then, suddenly seized by a horrible dread, she added:

"Do not attempt to deceive me. Are you not trying to elude me with false hopes? That would be cruel!"

"I am not deceiving you, madame. Chanlouineau has given me a weapon, which, I hope and believe, places the Duke de Sairmeuse in our power. He is omnipotent in Montaignac; the only man who could oppose him, M. de Courtornieu, is his friend. I believe that M. d'Escorval can be saved."

"Speak!" cried Maurice; "what must we do?"

"Pray and wait, Maurice. I must act alone in this matter, but be assured that I—the cause of all your misfortune—will leave nothing undone which is possible for mortal to do."

Absorbed in the task which she had imposed upon herself, Marie-Anne had failed to remark a stranger who had arrived during her absence—an old white-haired peasant.

The abbe called her attention to him.

"Here is a courageous friend," said he, "who since morning, has been searching for you everywhere, in order to give you news of your father."

Marie-Anne was so overcome that she could scarcely falter her gratitude.

"Oh, you need not thank me," answered the brave peasant. "I said to myself: 'The poor girl must be terribly anxious. I ought to relieve her of her misery.' So I came to tell you that M. Lacheneur is safe and well, except for a wound in the leg, which causes him considerable suffering, but which will be healed in two or three weeks. My son-in-law, who was hunting yesterday in the mountains, met him near the frontier in company with two of his friends. By this time he must be in Piedmont, beyond the reach of the gendarmes."

"Let us hope now," said the abbe, "that we shall soon hear what has become of Jean."

"I know, already, monsieur," responded Marie-Anne; "my brother has been badly wounded, and he is now under the protection of kind friends."

She bowed her head, almost crushed beneath her burden of sorrow, but soon rallying, she exclaimed:

"What am I doing! What right have I to think of my friends, when upon my promptness and upon my courage depends the life of an innocent man compromised by them?"

Maurice, the abbe, and the officers surrounded the brave young girl. They wished to know what she was about to attempt, and to dissuade her from incurring useless danger.

She refused to reply to their pressing

questions. They wished to accompany her, or, at least, to follow her at a distance, but she declared that she must go alone.

"I will return in less than two hours, and then we can decide what must be done," said she, as she hastened away.

To obtain an audience with the Duke de Sairmeuse was certainly a difficult matter; Maurice and the abbe had proved that only too well the previous day. Besieged by weeping and heart-broken families, he shut himself up securely, fearing, perhaps, that he might be moved by their entreaties.

Marie-Anne knew this, but it did not alarm her. Chanlouineau had given her a word, the same which he had used; and this word was a key which would unlock the most firmly and obstinately locked doors.

In the vestibule of the house occupied by the Duke de Sairmeuse, three or four valets stood talking.

"I am the daughter of M. Lacheneur," said Marie-Anne, addressing one of them. "I must speak to the duke at once, on matters connected with the revolt."

"The duke is absent."

"I came to make a revelation."

The servant's manner suddenly changed.

"In that case follow me, mademoiselle."

She followed him up the stairs and through two or three rooms. At last he opened a door saying, "enter." She went in.

It was not the Duke de Sairmeuse who was in the room, but his son, Martial.

Stretched upon a sofa, he was reading a paper by the light of a large candelabra.

On seeing Marie-Anne he sprang up, as pale and agitated as if the door had given passage to a spectre.

"You!" he stammered.

But he quickly mastered his emotion, and in a second his quick mind revolved all the possibilities that might have produced this visit.

"Lacheneur has been arrested!" he exclaimed, "and you wishing to save him from the fate which the military commission will pronounce upon him, have thought of me. Thank you, dearest Marie-Anne, thank you for your confidence. I will not abuse it. Let your heart be re-assured. We will save your father, I promise you—I swear it. How, I do not yet know. But what does that matter. It is enough that he shall be saved. I will have it so!"

His voice betrayed the intense passion and joy that was surging in his heart.

"My father has not been arrested," said Marie-Anne, coldly.

"Then," said Martial, with some hesitation—"Then it is Jean who is a prisoner."

"My brother is in safety. If he survives his wounds he will escape all attempts at capture."

From white the Marquis de Sairmeuse had turned as red as fire. By Marie-Anne's manner he saw that she knew of the duel. He made no attempt to deny it; but he tried to excuse himself.

"It was Jean who challenged me," said he; "I tried to avoid it. I only defended my own life in fair combat, and with equal weapons——"

Marie-Anne interrupted him.

"I reproach you for nothing, Monsieur le Marquis," she said, quietly.

"Ah! Marie-Anne, I am more severe than you. Jean was right to challenge me. I deserved his anger. He knew the baseness of which I had been guilty; but you—you were ignorant of it. Oh! Marie-Anne, if I wronged you in thought it was because I did not know you. Now I know that you, above all others, are pure and chaste."

He tried to take her hands; she repulsed him with horror; and broke into a fit of passionate sobbing.

Of all the blows she had received this last was most terrible and overwhelming.

What humiliation and shame! Now, indeed, was her cup of sorrow filled to overflowing. "Chaste and pure!" he had said. Oh, bitter mockery!

But Martial misunderstood the meaning of the poor girl's gesture.

"Oh! I comprehend your indignation," he resumed, with growing eagerness. "But if I have injured you even in thought, I now offer you reparation. I have been a fool—a miserable fool—for I love you; I love, and can love you only. I am the Marquis de Sairmeuse. I am the possessor of millions. I entreat you, I implore you to be my wife."

Marie-Anne listened in utter bewilderment. Vertigo seized her; even reason seemed to totter upon its throne.

But now, it had been Chanlouineau who, in his prison cell, cried that he died for love of her. Now, it was Martial, who avowed his willingness to sacrifice his ambition and his future for her sake.

And the poor peasant condemned to death, and the son of the all-powerful Duke de Sairmeuse, had avowed their passion in almost the very same words.

Martial paused, awaiting some response—a word, a gesture. But Marie-Anne remained mute, motionless, frozen.

"You are silent," he cried, with increased vehemence. "Do you question my sincerity? No, it is impossible! Then why this silence? Do you fear my father's opposition? You need not. I know how to gain his consent. Besides, what does his approbation matter to us? Have we any need of him? Am I not my own master? Am I not rich—

immensely rich? I should be a miserable fool, a coward, if I hesitated between his stupid prejudices and the happiness of my life."

He was evidently obliging himself to weigh all the possible objections, in order to answer them and overrule them.

"Is it on account of your family that you hesitate?" he continued. "Your father and brother are pursued, and France is closed against them. Very well, we will leave France, and they shall come and live near you. Jean will no longer dislike me when you are my wife. We will all live in England or in Italy. Now I am grateful for the fortune that will enable me to make life a continual enchantment for you. I love you—and in the happiness and tender love which shall be yours in the future, I will compel you to forget all the bitterness of the past!"

Marie-Anne knew the Marquis de Sairmeuse well enough to understand the intensity of the love revealed by these astounding propositions.

And for that very reason she hesitated to tell him that he had won this triumph over his pride in vain.

She was anxiously wondering to what extremity his wounded vanity would carry him, and if a refusal would not transform him into a bitter enemy.

"Why do you not answer?" asked Martial, with evident anxiety.

She felt that she must reply, that she must speak, say something; but she could not unclose her lips.

"I am only a poor girl, Monsieur le Marquis," she murmured, at last. "If I accepted your offer, you would regret it continually."

"Never!"

"But you are no longer free. You have already plighted your troth. Mlle. Blanche de Courtornieu is your promised wife."

"Ah! say one word—only one—and this engagement which I detest, is broken."

She was silent. It was evident that her mind was fully made up, and that she refused his offer.

"Do you hate me, then?" asked Martial, sadly.

If she had allowed herself to tell the whole truth Marie-Anne would have answered "Yes." The Marquis de Sairmeuse did inspire her with an almost insurmountable aversion.

"I no more belong to myself than you belong to yourself, monsieur," she faltered.

A gleam of hatred, quickly extinguished, shone in Martial's eye.

"Always Maurice!" said he.

"Always."

She expected an angry outburst, but he remained perfectly calm.

"Then," said he, with a forced smile, "I must believe this and other evidence. I must believe that you have forced me to play a most ridiculous part. Until now I doubted it."

The poor girl bowed her head, crimsoning with shame to the roots of her hair; but she made no attempt at denial.

"*I* was not my own mistress," she stammered; "my father commanded and threatened, and I—I obeyed him."

"That matters little," he interrupted; "your role has not been that which a pure young girl should play."

It was the only reproach he had uttered, and still he regretted it, perhaps because he did not wish her to know how deeply he was wounded, perhaps because—as he afterwards declared—he could not overcome his love for Marie-Anne.

"Now," he resumed, "I understand your presence here, You come to ask mercy for M. d'Escorval."

"Not mercy, but justice. The baron is innocent."

Martial approached Marie-Anne, and lowering his voice:

"If the father is innocent," he whispered, "then it is the son who is guilty."

She recoiled in terror. He knew the secret which the judges could not, or would not penetrate.

But seeing her anguish, he had pity.

"Another reason," said he, "for attempting to save the baron! His blood shed upon the guillotine would form an impassable gulf between Maurice and you. I will join my efforts to yours."

Blushing and embarrassed, Marie-Anne dared not thank him. How was she about to reward his generosity? By vilely traducing him. Ah! she would infinitely have preferred to see him angry and revengeful.

Just then a valet opened the door, and the Duke de Sairmeuse still in full uniform, entered.

"Upon my word!" he exclaimed, as he crossed the threshold, "I must confess that Chupin is an admirable hunter. Thanks to him——"

He paused abruptly: he had not perceived Marie-Anne until now.

"The daughter of that scoundrel Lacheneur!" said he, with an air of the utmost surprise. "What does she desire here?"

The decisive moment had come—the life of the baron hung upon Marie-Anne's courage and address. The consciousness of the terrible responsibility devolving upon her restored her self-control and calmness as if by magic.

"I have a revelation to sell to you, monsieur," she said, resolutely.

The duke regarded her with mingled wonder and curiosity; then, laughing heartily, he threw himself upon a sofa, exclaiming:

"Sell it, my pretty one—sell it! I cannot speak until I am alone with you."

At a sign from his father, Martial left the room.

"You can speak now," said the duke.

She did not lose a second.

"You must have read, monsieur," she began, "the circular convening the conspirators."

"Certainly; I have a dozen copies in my pocket."

"By whom do you suppose it was written?"

"By the elder D'Escorval, or by your father."

"You are mistaken, monsieur; that letter was the work of the Marquis de Sairmeuse, your son."

The duke sprang up, fire flashing from his eyes, his face purple with anger.

"Zounds! girl! I advise you to bridle your tongue!"

"The proof of what I have asserted exists."

"Silence, you hussy, or——"

"The lady who sends me here, monsieur, possesses the original of this circular, written by the hand of M. Martial, and I am obliged to tell you——"

She did not have an opportunity to complete the sentence. The duke sprang to the door, and, in a voice of thunder, called his son.

As soon as Martial entered the room:

"Repeat," said the duke—"repeat before my son what you have just said to me."

Boldly, with head erect, and clear, firm voice, Marie-Anne repeated her accusation.

She expected, on the part of the marquis, an indignant denial, cruel reproaches, or an angry explanation. Not a word. He listened with a nonchalant air, and she almost believed she could read in his eyes an encouragement to proceed, and a promise of protection.

When she had concluded:

"Well!" demanded the duke imperiously.

"First," replied Martial, lightly, "I would like to see this famous circular."

The duke handed him a copy.

"Here—read it."

Martial glanced over it, laughed heartily, and exclaimed:

"A clever trick."

"What do you say?"

"I say that this Chanlouineau is a sly rascal. Who the devil would have thought the fellow so cunning to see his honest face. Another lesson to teach one not to trust to appearances."

In all his life the duke de Sairmeuse had never received so severe a shock.

"Chanlouineau was not lying, then," he said to his son, in a choked, unnatural voice; "you *were* one of the instigators of this rebellion, then?"

Martial's face grew dark, and in a tone of disdainful hauteur, he replied:

"This is the fourth time, sir, that you have addressed that question to me, and for the fourth time I answer: 'No.' That should suffice. If the fancy had seized me for taking part in this movement, I should frankly confess it. What possible reason could I have for concealing anything from you?"

"The facts!" interrupted the duke, in a frenzy of passion; "the facts!"

"Very well," rejoined Martial, in his usual indifferent tone; "the fact is that the model of this circular does exist, that it was written in my best hand on a very large sheet of very poor paper. I recollect that in trying to find appropriate expressions I erased and rewrote several words. Did I date this writing? I think I did, but I could not swear to it."

"How do you reconcile this with your denials?" exclaimed M. de Sairmeuse.

"I can do this easily. Did I not tell you just now that Chanlouineau had made a tool of me?"

The duke no longer knew what to believe; but what exasperated him more than all else was his son's imperturbable tranquillity.

"Confess, rather, that you have been led into this filth by your mistress," he retorted, pointing to Marie-Anne.

But this insult Martial would not tolerate.

"Mlle. Lacheneur is not my mistress," he replied, in a tone so imperious that it was a menace. "It is true, however, that it rests only with her to decide whether she will be the Marquise de Sairmeuse to-morrow. Let us abandon these recriminations, they do not further the progress of our business."

The faint glimmer of reason which still lighted M. de Sairmeuse's mind, checked the still more insulting reply that rose to his lips. Trembling with suppressed rage, he made the circuit of the room several times, and finally paused before Marie-Anne, who remained in the same place, as motionless as a statue.

"Come, my good girl," said he, "give me the writing."

"It is not in my possession, sir."

"Where is it?"

"In the hands of a person who will give it to you only under certain conditions."

"Who is this person?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you."

There was both admiration and jealousy in the look that Martial fixed upon Marie-Anne.

He was amazed by her coolness and presence of mind. Ah! how powerful must be the passion that imparted such a ringing clearness to her voice, such brilliancy to her eyes, such precision to her responses.

"And if I should not accept the—the conditions which are imposed, what then?" asked M. de Sairmeuse.

"In that case the writing will be utilized."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, sir, that early to-morrow morning a trusty messenger will start for Paris, charged with the task of submitting this document to the eyes of certain persons who are not exactly friends of yours. He will show it to M. Laine, for example—or to the Duke de Richelieu; and he will, of course, explain to them its significance and its value. Will this writing prove the complicity of the Marquis de Sairmeuse? Yes, or no? Have you, or have you not, dared to try and to condemn to death the unfortunate men who were only the tools of your son?"

"Ah, wretch! hussy! viper!" interrupted the duke. He was beside himself. A foam gathered upon his lips, his eyes seemed starting from their sockets; he was no longer conscious of what he was saying.

"This," he exclaimed, with wild gestures, "is enough to appall me! Yes, I have bitter enemies, envious rivals, who would give their right hand for his execrable letter. Ah! if they obtain it they will demand an investigation, and then farewell to the rewards due to my services.

"It will be shouted from the housetops that Chanlouineau, in the presence of the tribunal, declared you, marquis, his leader and his accomplice. You will be obliged to submit to the scrutiny of physicians, who, seeing a freshly-healed wound, will require you to tell where you received it, and why you concealed it.

"Of what shall I *not* be accused? They will say that I expedited matters in order to silence the voice that had been raised against my son. Perhaps they will even say that I secretly favored the insurrection; I shall be vilified in the journals.

"And who has thus ruined the fortunes of our house, that promised so brilliantly? You, you alone, marquis.

"You believe in nothing, you doubt everything—you are cold, skeptical, disdainful, *blase*. But a pretty woman makes her appearance on the scene. You go wild like a school-boy and are ready to commit any act of folly. It is you who I am addressing, marquis. Do you hear me? Speak! what have you to say?"

Martial had listened to this tirade with unconcealed scorn, and without even attempting to interrupt it.

Now he responded, slowly:

"I think, sir, if Mlle. Lacheneur *had* any doubts of the value of the document she possesses, she has them no longer."

This response fell upon the duke's wrath like a bucket of ice water. He instantly comprehended his folly; and frightened by his own words, he stood stupefied with astonishment.

Without deigning to add another word, the marquis turned to Marie-Anne.

"Will you be so kind as to explain what is required of my father in exchange for this letter?"

"The life and liberty of M. d'Escorval."

The duke started as if he had received an electric shock.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "I knew they would ask something that was impossible!"

He sank back in his arm chair. A profound despair succeeded his frenzy. He buried his face in his hands, evidently seeking some expedient.

"Why did you not come to me before judgment was pronounced?" He murmured. "Then, I could have done anything—now, my hands are bound. The commission has spoken; the judgment must be executed——"

He rose, and in the tone of a man who is resigned to anything he said:

"Decidedly, I should risk more in attempting to save the baron"—in his anxiety he gave M. d'Escorval his title—"a thousand times more than I have to fear from my enemies. So, mademoiselle"—he no longer said, "my good girl"—"you can utilize your document."

The duke was about leaving the room, but Martial detained him by a gesture.

"Think again before you decide. Our situation is not without a precedent. A few months ago the Count de Lavalette was condemned to death. The king wished to pardon him, but his ministers and friends opposed it. Though the king was master, what did he do? He seemed to be deaf to all the supplications made in the prisoner's behalf. The scaffold was erected, and yet Lavalette was saved! And no one was compromised—yes, a jailer lost his position; he is living on his income now."

Marie-Anne caught eagerly at the idea so cleverly presented by Martial.

"Yes," she exclaimed, "the Count de Lavalette, protected by royal connivance, succeeded in making his escape."

The simplicity of the expedient—the authority of the example—seemed to make a vivid impression upon the duke. He was silent for a moment, and Marie-Anne fancied she saw an expression of relief steal over his face.

"Such an attempt would be very hazardous," he murmured; "yet, with care, and if one were sure that the secret would be kept——"

"Oh! the secret will be religiously preserved, monsieur," interrupted Marie-Anne.

With a glance Martial recommended silence; then turning to his father, he said:

"One can always consider an expedient, and calculate the consequences—that does not bind one. When is this sentence to be carried into execution?"

"To-morrow," responded the duke.

But even this terrible response did not cause Marie-Anne any alarm. The duke's anxiety and terror had taught her how much reason she had to hope; and she saw that Martial had openly espoused her cause.

"We have, then, only the night before us," resumed the marquis. "Fortunately, it is only half-past seven, and until ten o'clock my father can visit the citadel without exciting the slightest suspicion."

He paused suddenly. His eyes, in which had shone almost absolute confidence, became gloomy. He had just discovered an unexpected and, as it seemed to him, almost insurmountable difficulty.

"Have we any intelligent men in the citadel?" he murmured. "The assistance of a jailer or of a soldier is indispensable."

He turned to his father, and brusquely asked:

"Have you any man in whom you can confide?"

"I have three or four spies—they can be bought——"

"No! the wretch who betrays his comrade for a few sous, will betray you for a few louis. We must have an honest man who sympathizes with the opinions of Baron d'Escorval—an old soldier who fought under Napoleon, if possible."

A sudden inspiration visited Marie-Anne's mind.

"I know the man that you require!" she cried.

"You?"

"Yes, I. At the citadel."

"Take care! Remember that he must risk much. If this should be discovered, those who take part in it will be sacrificed."

"He of whom I speak is the man you need. I will be responsible for him."

"And he is a soldier?"

"He is only an humble corporal; but the nobility of his nature entitles him to the highest rank. Believe me, we can safely confide in him."

If she spoke thus, she who would willingly have given her life for the baron's salvation, she must be absolutely certain.

So thought Martial.

"I will confer with this man," said he. "What is his name?"

"He is called Bavois, and he is a corporal in the first company of grenadiers."

"Bavois," repeated Martial, as if to fix the name in his memory; "Bavois. My father will find some pretext for desiring him summoned."

"It is easy to find a pretext. He was the brave soldier left on gaurd at Escorval after the troops left the house."

"This promises well," said Martial. He had risen and gone to the fire-place in order to be nearer his father.

"I suppose," he continued, "the baron has been separated from the other prisoners."

"Yes, he is alone, in a large and very comfortable room."

"Where is it?"

"On the second story of the corner tower."

But Martial who was not so well acquainted with the citadel as his father, was obliged to reflect a moment.

"The corner tower!" said he; "is not that the tall tower which one sees from a distance, and which is built on a spot where the rock is almost perpendicular?"

"Precisely."

By the promptness M. de Sairmeuse displayed in replying, it was easy to see that he was ready to risk a good deal to effect the prisoner's deliverance.

"What kind of a window is that in the baron's room?" inquired Martial.

"It is quite large, and furnished with a double row of iron bars, securely fastened into the stone walls."

"It is easy enough to cut these bars. On which side does this window look?"

"On the country."

"That is to say, it overlooks the precipice. The devil! That is a serious difficulty, and yet, in one respect, it is an advantage, for they station no sentinels there, do they?"

"Never. Between the citadel wall and the edge of the precipice there is barely standing room. The soldiers do not venture there even in the day time."

"There is one more important question. What is the distance from M. d'Escorval's window to the ground?"

"It is about forty feet from the base of the tower."

"Good! And from the base of the tower to the foot of the precipice—how far is that?"

"Really, I scarcely know. Sixty feet, at least, I should think."

"Ah, that is high, terrible high. The baron fortunately is still agile and vigorous."

The duke began to be impatient.

"Now," said he to his son, "will you be so kind as to explain your plan?"

Martial had gradually resumed the careless tone which always exasperated his father.

"He is sure of success," thought Marie-Anne.

"My plan is simplicity itself," replied

Martial." "Sixty and forty are one hundred. It is necessary to procure one hundred feet of strong rope. It will make a very large bundle: but no matter. I will twist it around me, envelop myself in a large cloak, and accompany you to the citadel. You will send for Corporal Bavois; you will leave me alone with him in a quiet place; I will explain our wishes."

M. de Sairmeuse shrugged his shoulders.

"And how will you procure a hundred feet of rope at this hour in Montaignac? Will you go about from shop to shop? You might as well trumpet your project at once."

"I shall attempt nothing of the kind. What I cannot do the friends of the Escorval family will do."

The duke was about to offer some new objection when his son interrupted him.

"Pray do not forget the danger that threatens us," he said, earnestly, "nor the little time that is left us. I have committed a fault, leave me to repair it."

And turning to Marie-Anne:

"You may consider the baron saved," he pursued; "but it is necessary for me to confer with one of his friends. Return at once to the Hotel de France and tell the cure to meet me on the Place d'Armes, where I go to await him.

CHAPTER LXXIII.

THOUGH among the first to be arrested at the time of the panic before Montaignac, the Baron d'Escorval had not for an instant deluded himself with false hopes.

"I am a lost man," he thought. And confronting death calmly, he now thought only of the danger that threatened his son.

His mistake before the judges was the result of his preoccupation.

He did not breathe freely until he saw Maurice led from the hall by Abbe Midon and the friendly officers, for he knew that his son would try to confess connection with the affair.

Then, calm and composed, with head erect, and steadfast eye, he listened to the death sentence.

In the confusion that ensued in removing the prisoners from the hall, the baron found himself beside Chanlouineau, who had begun his noisy lamentations.

"Courage, my boy," he said, indignant at such apparent cowardice.

"Ah! it is easy to talk," whined the young farmer.

Then seeing that no one was observing them, he leaned toward the baron, and whispered:

"It is for you I am working. Save all your strength for to-night."

Chanlouineau's words and burning glance surprised M. d'Escorval, but he attributed both to fear. When the guards took him back to his cell, he threw himself upon his pallet, and before him rose that vision of the last hour, which is at once the hope and despair of those who are about to die.

He knew the terrible laws that govern a court-martial. The next day—in a few hours — at dawn, perhaps, they would take him from his cell, place him in front of a squad of soldiers, an officer would lift his sword, and all would be over.

Then what was to become of his wife and his son?

His agony on thinking of these dear ones was terrible. He was alone; he wept.

But suddenly he started up, ashamed of his weakness. He must not allow these thoughts to unnerve him. He was determined to meet death unflinchingly. Resolved to shake off the profound melancholy that was creeping over him, he walked about his cell, forcing his mind to occupy itself with material objects.

The room which had been allotted to him was very large. It had once communicated with the apartment adjoining; but the door had been walled up for a long time. The cement which held the large blocks of stone together had crumbled away, leaving crevices through which one might look from one room into the other.

M. d'Escorval mechanically applied his eye to one of these interstices. Perhaps he had a friend for a neighbor, some wretched man who was to share his fate. He saw no one. He called, first in a whisper, then louder. No voice responded to his.

"If I could only tear down this thin partition," he thought.

He trembled, then shrugged his shoulders. And if he did, what then? He would only find himself in another apartment similar to his own, and opening like his upon a corridor full of guards, whose monotonous tramp he could plainly hear as they passed to and fro.

What folly to think of escape! He knew that every possible precaution must have been taken to guard against it.

Yes, he knew this, and yet he could not refrain from examining his window. Two rows of iron bars protected it. These were placed in such a way that it was impossible for him to put out his head and see how far he was above the ground. The height, however, must be considerable, judging from the extent of the view.

The sun was setting; and through the violet haze the baron could discern an undulating line of hills, whose culminating point must be the land of the Reche.

The dark masses of foliage that he saw

on the right were probably the forests of Sairmeuse. On the left, he divined rather than saw, nestling between the hills, the valley of the Oiselle and Escorval.

Escorval, that lovely retreat where he had known such happiness, where he had hoped to die the calm and serene death of the just.

And remembering his past felicity, and thinking of his vanished dreams, his eyes once more filled with tears. But he quickly dried them on hearing the door of his cell open.

Two soldiers appeared.

One of the men bore a torch, the other, one of those long baskets divided into compartments which are used in carrying meals to the officers on guard.

These men were evidently deeply moved and yet, obeying a sentiment of instinctive delicacy, they affected a sort of gayety.

"Here is your dinner, monsieur," said one soldier; "it ought to be very good, for it comes from the cuisine of the commander of the citadel."

M. d'Escorval smiled sadly. Some attentions on the part of one's jailer have a sinister significance. Still, when he seated himself before the little table which they prepared for him, he found that he was really hungry.

He ate with a relish, and chatted quite cheerfully with the soldiers.

"Always hope for the best, sir," said one of these worthy fellows. "Who knows? Stranger things have happened!"

When the baron finished his repast, he asked for pen, ink, and paper. They brought what he desired.

He found himself again alone; but his conversation with the soldiers had been of service to him. His weakness had passed; his *sang-froid* had returned; he could now reflect.

He was surprised that he had heard nothing from Mme. d'Escorval and from Maurice.

Could it be that they had been refused access to the prison? No, that could not be; he could not imagine that there existed men sufficiently cruel to prevent a doomed man from pressing to his heart, in a last embrace, his wife and his son.

Yet, how was it that neither the baroness nor Maurice had made an attempt to see him! Something must have prevented them from doing so. What could it be?

He imagined the worst misfortunes. He saw his wife writhing in agony, perhaps dead. He pictured Maurice, wild with grief, upon his knees at the bedside of his mother.

But they might come, yet. He consulted his watch. It marked the hour of seven.

But he waited in vain. No one came.

He took up his pen, and was about to write, when he heard a bustle in the corridor outside. The clink of spurs resounded on the flags; he heard the sharp clink of the rifle as the guard presented arms.

Trembling, the baron sprang up, saying:

"They have come at last!"

He was mistaken; the footsteps died away in the distance.

"A round of inspection!" he murmured.

But at the same moment, two objects thrown through the tiny opening in the door of his cell fell on the floor in the middle of the room.

M. d'Escorval caught them up. Some one had thrown him two files.

His first feeling was one of distrust. He knew that there were jailers who left no means untried to dishonor their prisoners before delivering them to the executioner.

Was it a friend, or an enemy, that had given him these instruments of deliverance and of liberty?

Chanlouineau's words and the look that accompanied them recurred to his mind, perplexing him still more.

He was standing with knitted brows, turning and re-turning the fine and well-tempered files in his hands, when he suddenly perceived upon the floor a tiny scrap of paper which had, at first, escaped his notice.

He snatched it up, unfolded it, and read:

"Your friends are at work. Everything is prepared for your escape. Make haste and saw the bars of your window. Maurice and his mother embrace you. Hope, courage!"

Beneath these few lines was the letter M.

But the baron did not need this initial to be reassured. He had recognized Abbe Midon's handwriting.

"Ah! he is a true friend," he murmured.

Then the recollection of his doubts and despair arose in his mind.

"This explains why neither my wife nor son came to visit me," he thought. "And I doubted their energy—and I was complaining of their neglect!"

Intense joy filled his breast; he raised the letter that promised him life and liberty to his lips, and enthusiastically exclaimed:

"To work! to work!"

He had chosen the finest of the two files, and was about to attack the ponderous bars, when he fancied he heard some one open the door of the next room.

Some one had opened it, certainly. The person closed it again, but did not lock it.

Then the baron heard some one moving cautiously about. What did all this

mean? Were they incarcerating some new prisoner, or were they stationing a spy there?

Listening breathlessly, the baron heard a singular sound, whose cause it was absolutely impossible to explain.

Noiselessly he advanced to the former communicating door, knelt, and peered through one of the interstices.

The sight that met his eyes amazed him.

A man was standing in a corner of the room. The baron could see the lower part of the man's body by the light of a large lantern which he had deposited on the floor at his feet. He was turning around and around very quickly, by this movement unwinding a long rope which had been twined around his body as thread is wound about a bobbin.

M. d'Escorval rubbed his eyes as if to assure himself that he was not dreaming. Evidently this rope was intended for him. It was to be attached to the broken bars.

But how had this man succeeded in gaining admission to this room? Who could it be that enjoyed such liberty in the prison? He was not a soldier—or, at least, he did not wear a uniform.

Unfortunately, the highest crevice was in such a place that the visual ray did not strike the upper part of the man's body; and, despite the baron's efforts, he was unable to see the face of this friend—he judged him to be such—whose boldness verged on folly.

Unable to resist his intense curiosity, M. d'Escorval was on the point of rapping on the wall to question him, when the door of the room occupied by this man, whom the baron already called his savior, was impetuously thrown open.

Another man entered, whose face was also outside the baron's range of vision; and the new-comer, in a tone of astonishment, exclaimed:

"Good heavens! what are you doing?"

The baron drew back in despair.

"All is discovered!" he thought.

The man whom M. d'Escorval believed to be his friend did not pause in his labor of unwinding the rope, and it was in the most tranquil voice that he responded:

"As you see, I am freeing myself from this burden of rope, which I find extremely uncomfortable. There are at least sixty yards of it, I should think—and what a bundle it makes! I feared they would discover it under my cloak."

"And what are you going to do with all this rope?" inquired the new-comer.

"I am going to hand it to Baron d'Escorval, to whom I have already given a file. He must make his escape to-night."

So improbable was this scene that the baron could not believe his own ears.

"I cannot be awake; I must be dreaming," he thought.

The new-comer uttered a terrible oath, and, in an almost threatening tone, he said:

"We will see about that! If you have gone mad, I, thank God! still possess my reason! I will not permit——"

"Pardon!" interrupted the other, coldly, "you will permit it. This is merely the result of your own—credulity. When Chanlouineau asked you to allow him to receive a visit from Mlle. Lacheneur, that was the time you should have said: 'I will not permit it.' Do you know what the fellow desired? Simply to give Mlle. Lacheneur a letter of mine, so compromising in its nature, that if it ever reaches the hands of a certain person of my acquaintance, my father and I will be obliged to reside in London in future. Then farewell to the projects for an alliance between our two families!"

The new-comer heaved a mighty sigh accompanied by a half angry, half sorrowful exclamation; but the other, without giving him any opportunity to reply, resumed:

"You, yourself, marquis, would doubtless be compromised. Were you not a chamberlain during the reign of Bonaparte? Ah, marquis! how could a man of your experience, a man so subtle, and penetrating, and acute, allow himself to be duped by a low, ignorant peasant?"

Now M. d'Escorval understood. He was not dreaming; it was the Marquis de Courtornieu and Martial de Sairmeuse who were talking on the other side of the wall.

This poor M. de Courtornieu had been so entirely crushed by Martial's revelation that he no longer made any effort to oppose him.

"And this terrible letter?" he groaned.

"Marie-Anne Lacheneur gave it to Abbe Midon, who came to me and said: 'Either the baron will escape, or this letter will be taken to the Duke de Richelieu.' I voted for the baron's escape, I assure you. The abbe procured all that was necessary; he met me at a rendezvous which I appointed in a quiet spot; he coiled all his rope about my body, and here I am."

Then you think if the baron escapes they will give you back your letter?"

"Most assuredly."

"Deluded man! As soon as the baron is safe, they will demand the life of another prisoner, with the same menaces."

"By no means."

"You will see."

"I shall see nothing of the kind, for a very simple reason. I have the letter now in my pocket. The abbe gave it to me in exchange for my word of honor."

M. de Courtornieu's exclamation proved that he considered the abbe an egregious fool.

"What!" he exclaimed. "You hold the proof, and—— But this is madness! Burn this accursed letter by the flames of this lantern, and let the baron go where his slumbers will be undisturbed."

Martial's silence betrayed something like stupor.

"What! you would do this—you?" he demanded, at last.

"Certainly—and without the slightest hesitation."

"Ah well! I cannot say that I congratulate you."

The sneer was so apparent that M. de Courtornieu was sorely tempted to make an angry response. But he was not a man to yield to his first impulse—this former chamberlain under the emperor, now become a *grand prevot* under the Restoration.

He reflected. Should he, on account of a sharp word, quarrel with Martial—with the only suitor who had pleased his daughter? A rupture—then he would be left without any prospect of a son-in-law! When would heaven send him such another? And how furious Mlle. Blanche would be!

He concluded to swallow the bitter pill; and it was with a paternal indulgence of manner that he said:

"You are young, my dear Martial."

The baron was still kneeling by the partition, his ear glued to the crevices, holding his breath in an agony of suspense.

"You are only twenty, my dear Martial, pursued the Marquis de Courtornieu; "you possess the ardent enthusiasm and generosity of youth. Complete your undertaking; I shall interpose no obstacle: but remember that all may be discovered—and then——"

"Have no fears, sir," interrupted the young marquis; "I have taken every precaution. Did you see a single soldier in the corridor, just now? No. That is because my father has, at my solicitation, assembled all the officers and guards under pretext of ordering exceptional precautions. He is talking to them now. This gave me an opportunity to come here unobserved. No one will see me when I go out. Who, then, will dare suspect me of having any hand in the baron's escape?"

"If the baron escapes justice will demand to know who aided him."

Martial laughed.

"If justice seeks to know, she will find a culprit of my providing. Go, now; I have told you all. I had but one person to fear: that was yourself. A trusty messenger requested you to join me here. You came; you know all, you have agreed to remain neutral. I am tranquil. The baron will be safe in Piedmont when the sun rises."

He picked up his lantern, and added, gayly:

"But let us go—my father cannot harangue those soldiers forever."

"But," insisted M. de Courtornieu, "you have not told me——"

"I will tell you all, but not here. Come, come!"

They went out, locking the door behind them; and then the baron rose from his knees.

All sorts of contradictory ideas, doubts, and conjectures filled his mind.

What could this letter have contained? Why had not Chanlouineau used it to procure his own salvation? Who would have believed that Martial would be so faithful to a promise wrested from him by threats?

But this was a time for action, not for reflection. The bars were heavy, and there were two rows of them.

M. d'Escorval set to work.

He had supposed that the task would be difficult. It was a thousand times more so than he had expected; he discovered this almost immediately.

It was the first time that he had ever worked with a file, and he did not know how to use it. His progress was despairingly slow.

Nor was that all. Though he worked as cautiously as possible, each movement of the instrument across the iron produced a harsh, grating sound that froze his blood with terror. What if some one should overhear this noise? And it seemed to him impossible for it to escape notice, since he could plainly distinguish the measured tread of the guards, who had resumed their watch in the corridor.

So slight was the result of his labors, that at the end of twenty minutes he experienced a feeling of profound discouragement.

At this rate, it would be impossible for him to sever the first bar before daybreak. What, then, was the use of spending his time in fruitless labor? Why mar the dignity of death by the disgrace of an unsuccessful effort to escape?

He was hesitating when footsteps approached his cell. He hastened to seat himself at the table.

The door opened and a soldier entered, to whom an officer who did not cross the threshold remarked:

"You have your instructions, corporal, keep a close watch. If the prisoner needs anything, call."

M. d'Escorval's heart throbbed almost to bursting. What was coming now?

Had M. de Courtornieu's counsels carried the day, or had Martial sent some one to aid him?

"We must not be dawdling here," said

the corporal, as soon as the door was closed.

M. d'Escorval bounded from his chair. This man was a friend. Here was aid and life.

"I am Bavois," continued the corporal. "Some one said to me just now: 'A friend of the emperor is in danger; are you willing to lend him a helping hand!' I replied; 'Present,' and here I am!"

This certainly was a brave soul. The baron extended his hand, and in a voice trembling with emotion:

"Thanks," said he; "thanks to you who, without knowing me, expose yourself to the greatest danger for my sake."

Bavois shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"Positively my old hide is no more precious than yours. If we do not succeed, they will chop off our heads with the same axe. But we shall succeed. Now, let us cease talking and proceed to business."

As he spoke he drew from beneath his long overcoat a strong iron crowbar and a small vial of brandy, and deposited them upon the bed.

He then took the candle and passed it back and forth before the window five or six times.

"What are you doing?" inquired the baron, in suspense.

"I am signaling to your friends that everything is progressing favorably. They are down there waiting for us; and see, now they are answering."

The baron looked, and three times they saw a little flash of flame like that produced by the burning of a pinch of gunpowder.

"Now," said the corporal, "we are all right. Let us see what progress you have made with the bars."

"I have scarcely begun," murmured M. d'Escorval.

The corporal inspected the work.

"You may indeed say that you have made no progress," said he; "but, never mind, I have been a locksmith, and I know how to handle a file,"

Having drawn the cork from the vial of brandy which he had brought, he fastened the stopper to the end of one of the files, and swathed the handle of the instrument with a piece of damp linen.

"That is what they call putting a *stop* on the instrument," he remarked, by way of explanation.

Then he made an energetic attack on the bars. It at once became evident that he had not exaggerated his knowledge of the subject, nor the efficacy of his precautions for deadening the sound. The harsh grating that had so alarmed the baron was no longer heard, and Bavois, finding he had nothing more to dread from the keenest ears, now made preparations to shelter himself from observation.

To cover the opening in the door would arouse suspicion at once—so the corporal adopted another expedient.

Moving the little table to another part of the room, he placed the light upon it, in such a position that the window remained entirely in shadow.

Then he ordered the baron to sit down, and handing him a paper, said:

"Now read aloud, without stopping for an instant, until you see me cease work."

By this method they might reasonably hope to deceive the guards outside in the corridor. Some of them, indeed, did come to the door and look in, then went away to say to their companions:

"We have just taken a look at the prisoner. He is very pale, and his eyes are glittering feverishly. He is reading aloud to divert his mind. Corporal Bavois is looking out of the window. It must be dull music for him."

The baron's voice would also be of advantage in overpowering any suspicious sound, should there be one.

And while Bavois worked, M. d'Escorval read, read, read.

He had completed the perusal of the entire paper, and was about to begin it again, when the old soldier, leaving the window, motioned him to stop.

"Half the task is completed," he said, in a whisper. "The lower bars are cut."

"Ah! how can I ever repay you for your devotion!" murmured the baron.

"Hush! not a word!" interrupted Bavois. "If I escape with you, I can never return here; and I shall not know where to go, for the regiment, you see, is my only family. Ah, well! if you will give me a home with you, I shall be content."

Whereupon he swallowed a big draught of brandy, and set to work with renewed ardor.

The corporal had cut one of the second row of bars, when he was interrupted by M. d'Escorval who, without discontinuing his reading, had approached and pulled Bavois's long coat to attract his attention.

He turned quickly.

"What is it?"

"I heard a singular noise."

"Where?"

"In the adjoining room where the ropes are."

Honest Bavios muttered a terrible oath.

Do they intend to betray us? I risked my life, and they promised me fair play."

He placed his ear against an opening in the partition, and listened for a long time. Nothing, not the slightest sound.

"It must have been some rat that you heard," he said, at last. "Resume your reading."

And he began his work again. This

was the only interruption, and a little before four o'clock everything was ready. The bars were cut, and the ropes, which had been drawn through an opening in the wall, were coiled under the window.

The decisive moment had come. Bavois took the counterpane from the bed, fastened it over the opening in the door, and filled up the key-hole.

"Now," said he, in the same measured tone which he would have used in instructing his recruits, "attention, sir, and obey the word of command."

Then he calmly explained that the escape would consist of two distinct operations; the first in gaining the narrow platform at the base of the tower; the second, in descending to the foot of the precipitous rock.

The abbe, who understood this, had brought Martial two ropes; the one to be used in the descent of the precipice being considerably longer than the other.

"I will fasten the shortest rope under your arms, monsieur, and I will let you down to the base of the tower. When you have reached it, I will pass you the longer rope and the crowbar. Do not miss them. If we find ourselves without them, on that narrow ledge of rock, we shall either be compelled to deliver ourselves up, or throw ourselves down the precipice. I shall not be long in joining you. Are you ready?"

M. d'Escorval lifted his arms, the rope was fastened securely about him, and he crawled through the window.

From there, the height seemed immense. Below, in the barren fields that surrounded the citadel, eight persons were waiting, silent, anxious, breathless.

They were Mme. d'Escorval and Maurice, Marie-Anne, Abbe Midon, and the four retired army officers.

There was no moon; but the night was very clear, and they could see the tower quite plainly.

Soon after four o'clock sounded they saw a dark object glide slowly down the side of the tower—it was the baron. After a little, another form followed very rapidly—it was Bavois.

Half of the perilous journey was accomplished.

From below, they could see the two figures moving about on the narrow platform. The corporal and the baron were exerting all their strength to fix the crowbar securely in a crevice of the rock.

In a moment or two one of the figures stepped from the projecting rock and glided gently down the side of the precipice.

It could be none other than M. d'Escorval. Transported with happiness, his wife sprang forward with open arms to receive him.

Wretched woman! A terrific cry rent the still night air.

M. d'Escorval was falling from a height of fifty feet; he was hurled down to the foot of the rocky precipice. The rope had parted.

Had it broken naturally?

Maurice, who examined the end of it, exclaimed with horrible imprecations of hatred and vengeance that they had been betrayed—that their enemy had arranged to deliver only a dead body into their hands,—that the rope, in short, had been foully tampered with—cut!

CHAPTER LXXIV.

CHUPIN had not taken time to sleep, nor scarcely time to drink, since that unfortunate morning when the Duke de Sairmeuse ordered affixed to the walls of Montaignac, that decree in which he promised twenty thousand francs to the person who should deliver up Lacheneur, dead or alive.

"Twenty thousand francs" Chupin muttered gloomily; "twenty sacks with a hundred pistoles in each! Ah! if I could discover Lacheneur; even if he were dead and buried a hundred feet under ground, I should gain the reward."

The appellation of traitor, which he would receive; the shame and condemnation that would fall upon him and his, did not make him hesitate for a moment.

He saw but one thing—the reward—the blood-money.

Unfortunately, he had nothing, whatever, to guide him in his researches; no clue, however vague.

All that was known in Montaignac was that M. Lacheneur's horse was killed at the Croix-d'Arcy.

But no one knew whether Lacheneur himself had been wounded, or whether he had escaped from the fray uninjured. Had he reached the frontier? or had he found an asylum in the house of one of his friends.

Chupin was thus hungering for the price of blood, when, on the day of the trial, as he was returning from the citadel, after making his deposition, he entered a drinking saloon. While there he heard the name of Lacheneur uttered in low tones near him.

Two peasants were emptying a bottle of wine, and one of them, an old man, was telling the other that he had come to Montaignac to give Mlle. Lacheneur news of her father.

He said that his son-in-law had met the chief conspirator in the mountains which separate the arrondissement of Montaignac from Savoy. He even mentioned the exact place of meeting, which was near

Saint Pavin-des-Gottes, a tiny village of only a few houses.

Certainly the worthy man did not think he was committing a dangerous indiscretion. In his opinion, Lacheneur had, ere this, crossed the frontier, and was out of danger.

In this he was mistaken.

The frontier bordering on Savoy was guarded by soldiers, who had received orders to allow none of the conspirators to pass.

The passage of the frontier, then, presented many great difficulties, and even if a man succeeded in effecting it, he might be arrested and imprisoned on the other side, until the formalities of extradition had been complied with.

Chupin saw his advantage, and instantly decided on his course.

He knew that he had not a moment to lose. He threw a coin down upon the counter, and without waiting for his change, rushed back to the citadel, and asked the sergeant at the gate for pen and paper.

The old rascal generally wrote slowly and painfully; to-day it took him but a moment to trace these lines:

"I know Lacheneur's retreat, and beg monseigneur to order some mounted soldiers to accompany me, in order to capture him. "CHUPIN."

This note was given to one of the guards, with a request to take it to the Duke de Sairmeuse, who was presiding over the military commision.

Five minutes later, the soldier reappeared with the same note.

Upon the margin the Duke had written an order, placing at Chupin's disposal, a lieutenant and eight men chosen from the Montaignac chasseurs, who could be relied upon, and who were not suspected (as were the other troops) of sympathizing with the rebels.

Chupin also requested a horse for his own use, and this was accorded him. The duke had just received this note when, with a triumphant air, he abruptly entered the room where Marie-Anne and his son were negotiating for the release of Baron d'Escorval.

It was because he believed in the truth of the rather hazardous assertion made by his spy that he exclaimed, upon the threshold:

"Upon my word! it must be confessed that this Chupin is an incomparable huntsman! Thanks to him——"

Then he saw Mlle. Lacheneur, and suddenly checked himself.

Unfortunately, neither Martial nor Marie-Anne were in a state of mind to notice this remark and its interruption.

Had he been questioned, the duke would probably have allowed the truth to escape him, and M. Lacheneur might have been saved.

But Lacheneur was one of those unfortunate beings who seem to be pursued by an evil destiny which they can never escape.

Buried beneath his horse, M. Lacheneur had lost consciousness.

When he regained his senses, restored by the fresh morning air, the place was silent and deserted. Not far from him, he saw two dead bodies which had not yet been removed.

It was a terrible moment, and in the depth of his soul he cursed death, which had refused to heed his entreaties. Had he been armed, doubtless, he would have ended by suicide, the most cruel mental torture which man was ever forced to endure—but he had no weapon.

He was obliged to accept the chastisement of life.

Perhaps, too, the voice of honor whispered that it was cowardice to strive to escape the responsibility of one's acts by death.

At last, he endeavored to draw himself out from beneath the body of his horse.

This proved to be no easy matter, as his foot was still in the stirrup, and his limbs were so badly cramped that he could scarcely move them. He finally succeeded in freeing himself, however, and, on examination, discovered that he, who it would seem ought to have been killed ten times over, had only one hurt—a bayonet wound in the leg, extending from the ankle almost to the knee.

Such a wound, of course, caused him not a little suffering, and he was trying to bandage it with his handkerchief, when he heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

He had no time for reflection; he sprang into the forest that lies to the left of the Croix-d'Arcy.

The troops were returning to Montaignac after pursuing the rebels for more than three miles. There were about two hundred soldiers, and they were bringing back, as prisoners, about twenty peasants.

Hidden by a great oak scarcely fifteen paces from the road, Lacheneur recognized several of the prisoners in the gray light of dawn. It was only by the merest chance that he escaped discovery; and he fully realized how difficult it would be for him to gain the frontier without falling into the hands of the detachment of soldiery, who were doubtless scouring the country in every direction.

Still he did not despair.

The mountains lay only two leagues away; and he firmly believed that he could successfully elude his pursuers as soon as he gained the shelter of the hills.

He began his journey courageously.

Alas! he had not realized how exhausted he had become from the excessive labor and excitement of the past few days, and by the loss of blood from his wound, which he could not staunch.

He tore up a pole in one of the vineyards to serve as a staff, and dragged himself along, keeping in the shelter of the woods as much as possible, and creeping along beside the hedges and in the ditches when he was obliged to traverse an open space.

The great physical suffering, and to the most cruel mental anguish, was now added an agony that momentarily increased—hunger.

He had eaten nothing for thirty hours, and he felt terribly weak from lack of nourishment. This torture soon became so intolerable that he was willing to brave anything to appease it.

At last he perceived the roofs of a tiny hamlet. He decided to enter it and ask for food. He was on the outskirts of the village, when he heard the rolling of a drum. Instinctively he hid behind a wall. But it was only a town-crier beating his drum to call the people together.

And soon a voice rose so clear and penetrating that each word it uttered fell distinctly on Lacheneur's ears.

It said:

"This is to inform you that the authorities of Montaignac promise to give a reward of twenty thousand francs—two thousand pistoles, you understand—to him who will deliver up the man known as Lacheneur, dead or alive. Dead or alive, you understand. If he is dead, the compensation will be the same; twenty thousand francs! It will be paid in gold."

With a bound, Lacheneur had risen, wild with despair and horror. Though he had believed himself utterly exhausted, he found superhuman strength to flee.

A price had been set upon his head. This frightful thought awakened in his breast the frenzy that renders a hunted wild beast so dangerous.

In all the villages around him he fancied he could hear the rolling of drums, and the voice of the crier proclaiming this infamous edict.

Go where he would now, he was a tempting bait offered to treason and cupidity. In what human creature could he confide? Under what roof could he ask shelter?

And even if he were dead, he would still be worth a fortune.

Though he died from lack of nourishment and exhaustion under a bush by the way side, his emaciated body would still be worth twenty thousand francs.

And the man who found his corpse would not give it burial. He would place it on his cart and bear it to Montaignac. He would go to the authorities and say:

"Here is Lacheneur's body—give me the reward!"

How long and by what paths he pursued his flight, he could not tell.

But several hours after, as he traversed the wooded hills of Charves, he saw two men, who sprang up and fled at his approach. In a terrible voice, he called after them:

"Eh! you men! do each of you desire a thousand pistoles? I am Lacheneur."

They paused when they recognized him, and Lacheneur saw that they were two of his followers. They were well-to-do farmers, and it had been very difficult to induce them to take part in the revolt.

These men had part of a loaf of bread and a little brandy. They gave both to the famished man.

They sat down beside him on the grass, and while he was eating they related their misfortunes. Their connection with the conspiracy had been discovered; their houses were full of soldiers, who were hunting for them, but they hoped to reach Italy by the aid of a guide who was waiting for them at an appointed place,

Lacheneur extended his hand to them.

"Then I am saved," said he. "Weak and wounded as I am, I should perish if I were left alone."

But the two farmers did not accept the hand he offered.

"We should leave you," said the younger man, gloomily, "for you are the cause of our misfortunes. You deceived us, Monsieur Lacheneur."

He dared not protest, so just was the reproach.

"Nonsense! let him come all the same," said the other, with a peculiar glance at his companion.

So they walked on, and that same evening, after nine hours of traveling on the mountains, they crossed the frontier.

But this long journey was not made without bitter reproaches, and even more bitter recriminations.

Closely questioned by his companions, Lacheneur, exhausted both in mind and body, finally admitted the insincerity of the promises with which he had inflamed the zeal of his followers. He acknowledged that he had spread the report that Marie-Louise and the young king of Rome were concealed in Montaignac, and that this report was a gross falsehood. He confessed that he had given the signal for the revolt without any chance of success, and without means of action, leaving everything to chance. In short, he confessed that nothing was real save his hatred, his implacable hatred of the Sairmeuse family.

A dozen times, at least, during this terrible avowal, the peasants who ac-

companied him were on the point of hurling him down the precipices upon whose verge they were walking.

"So it was to gratify his own spite," they thought, quivering with rage, "that he sets everybody to fighting and killing one another—that he ruins us, and drives us into exile. We will see."

The fugitives went to the nearest house after crossing the frontier.

It was a lonely inn, about a league from the little village of Saint-Jean-de-Coche, and was kept by a man named Balstain.

They rapped, in spite of the lateness of the hour—it was past midnight. They were admitted, and they ordered supper.

But Lacheneur, weak from loss of blood, and exhausted by his long tramp, declared that he would eat no supper.

He threw himself upon a bed in an adjoining room, and was soon asleep.

This was the first time since their meeting with Lacheneur, that his companions had found an opportunity to talk together in private.

The same idea had occurred to both of them.

They believed that by delivering up Lacheneur to the authorities, they might obtain pardon for themselves.

Neither of these men would have consented to receive a single sou of the money promised to the betrayer; but to exchange their life and liberty for the life and liberty of Lacheneur did not seem to them a culpable act, under the circumstances.

"For did he not deceive us?" they said to themselves.

They decided, at last, that as soon as they had finished their supper, they would go to Saint-Jean-de-Coche and inform the Piedmontese guards.

But they reckoned without their host.

They had spoken loud enough to be overheard by Balstain, the inn-keeper, who had learned, during the day, of the magnificent reward which had been promised to Lacheneur's captor.

When he heard the name of the guest who was sleeping quietly under his roof, a thirst for gold seized him. He whispered a word to his wife, then escaped through the window to run and summon the gendarmes.

He had been gone half an hour before the peasants left the house; for to muster up courage for the act they were about to commit they had been obliged to drink heavily.

They closed the door so violently on going out that Lacheneur was awakened by the noise. He sprang up, and came out into the adjoining room.

The wife of the inn-keeper was there alone.

"Where are my friends?" he asked, anxiously. "Where is your husband?"

Moved by sympathy, the woman tried to falter some excuse, but finding none, she threw herself at his feet, crying:

"Fly, monsieur, save yourself—you are betrayed!"

Lacheneur rushed back into the other room, seeking a weapon with which he could defend himself, an issue through which he could flee!

He had thought that they might abandon him, but betray him—no, never!

"Who has sold me?" he asked, in a strained, unnatural voice.

"Your friends—the two men who supped there at that table."

"Impossible, madame, impossible!"

He did not suspect the designs and hopes of his former comrades; and he could not, he would not believe them capable of ignobly betraying him for gold.

"But," pleaded the inn-keeper's wife, still on her knees before him, "they have just started for Saint-Jean-de-Coche, where they will denounce you. I heard them say that your life would purchase theirs. They have certainly gone to summon the gendarmes! Is this not enough, or am I obliged to endure the shame of confessing that my own husband, too, has gone to betray you."

Lacheneur understood it all now! And this supreme misfortune, after all the misery he had endured, broke him down completely.

Great tears gushed from his eyes, and sinking down into a chair, he murmured:

"Let them come; I am ready for them. No, I will not stir from here! My miserable life is not worth such a struggle."

But the wife of the traitor rose, and grasping the unfortunate man's clothing, she shook him, she dragged him to the door—she would have carried him had she possessed sufficient strength.

"You shall not remain here," said she, with extraordinary vehemence. "Fly, save yourself. You shall not be taken here; it will bring misfortune upon our house!"

Bewildered by these violent adjurations, and urged on by the instinct of self-preservation, so powerful in every human heart, Lacheneur stepped out upon the threshold.

The night was very dark, and a chilling fog intensified the gloom.

"See, madame," said the poor fugitive gently, "how can I find my way through these mountains, which I do not know, and where there are no roads—where the foot-paths are scarcely discernible."

With a quick movement Balstain's wife pushed Lacheneur out, and turning him as one does a blind man to set him on the right track.

"Walk straight before you," said she, "always against the wind. God will protect you. Farewell!"

He turned to ask further directions, but she had re-entered the house and closed the door.

Upheld by a feverish excitement, he walked for long hours. He soon lost his way, and wandered on through the mountains, benumbed with cold, stumbling over rocks, sometimes falling.

Why he was not precipitated to the depths of some chasm it is difficult to explain.

He lost all idea of his whereabouts, and the sun was high in the heavens when he at last met a human being of whom he could inquire his way.

It was a little shepherd boy, in pursuit of some stray goats, whom he encountered; but the lad, frightened by the wild and haggard appearance of the stranger, at first refused to approach.

The offer of a piece of money induced him to come a little nearer.

"You are on the summit of the mountain, monsieur," said he; "and exactly on the boundary line. Here is France; there is Savoy."

"And what is the nearest village?"

"On the Savoyard side, Saint-Jean-le-Coche; on the French side, Saint Pavin."

So after all his terrible exertions, Lacheneur was not a league from the inn.

Appalled by this discovery, he remained for a moment undecided which course to pursue.

What did it matter? Why should the doomed hesitate? Do not all roads lead to the abyss into which they must sink.

He remembered the gendarmes that the innkeeper's wife had warned him against, and slowly and with great difficulty descended the steep mountain-side leading down to France.

He was near Saint-Pavin, when, before an isolated cottage, he saw a pretty peasant-woman spinning in the sunshine.

He dragged himself towards her, and in weak tones begged her hospitality.

On seeing this man, whose face was ghastly pale, and whose clothing was torn and soiled with dust and blood, the woman rose, evidently more surprised than alarmed.

She looked at him closely, and saw that his age, his stature, and his features corresponded with the descriptions of Lacheneur, which had been scattered thickly about the frontier.

"You are the conspirator they are hunting for, and for whom they promise a reward of twenty thousand francs," she said.

Lacheneur trembled.

"Yes, I am Lacheneur," he replied, after a moment's hesitation; "I am Lacheneur. Betray me, if you will, but in charity's name give me a morsel of bread, and allow me to rest a little."

At the words "betray me," the young woman made a gesture of horror and disgust.

"We betray you, sir!" said she. "Ah! you do not know the Antoines! Enter our house, and lie down upon the bed while I prepare some refreshments for you. When my husband comes home, we will see what can be done."

It was nearly sunset when the master of the house, a robust mountaineer, with a frank face, returned.

On beholding the stranger seated at his fireside he turned frightfully pale.

"Unfortunate woman!" he whispered to his wife, "do you not know that any man who shelters this fugitive will be shot, and his house leveled to the ground?

Lacheneur rose with a shudder.

He had not known this. He knew the infamous reward which had been promised to his betrayer; but he had not known the danger his presence brought upon these worthy people.

"I will go at once, sir," said he, gently.

But the peasant placed his large hand kindly upon his guest's shoulder, and forced him to resume his seat.

"It was not to drive you away that I said what I did," he remarked. "You are at home, and you shall remain here until I can find some means of ensuring your safety."

The pretty peasant woman flung her arms about her husband's neck, and in tones of the most ardent affection exclaimed: "Ah! you are a noble man, Antoine."

He smiled, embraced her tenderly, then, pointing to the open door:

"Watch!" he said. "I feel it my duty to tell you, sir, that it will not be easy to save you," resumed the honest peasant. "The promises of reward have set all evil-minded people on the alert. They know that you are in the neighborhood. A rascally innkeeper has crossed the frontier for the express purpose of betraying your whereabouts to the French gendarmes."

"Balstain?"

"Yes, Balstain; and he is hunting for you now. That is not all. As I passed through Saint-Pavin, on my return, I saw eight mounted soldiers, guided by a peasant, also on horseback. They declared that they knew you were concealed in the village, and they were going to search every house."

These soldiers were none other than the Montaignac chasseurs, placed at Chupin's disposal by the Duke de Sairmeuse.

It was indeed as Antoine had said.

The task was certainly not at all to their taste, but they were closely watched by the lieutenant in command, who hoped to receive some substantial reward if the expedition was crowned with success. Antoine, meanwhile, continued his exposition of his hopes and fears.

"Wounded and exhausted as you are," he was saying to Lacheueur, "you will be in no condition to make a long march in less than a fortnight. Until then you must conceal yourself. Fortunately, I know a safe retreat in the mountain, not far from here. I will take you there to-night, with provisions enough to last you for a week."

A stifled cry from his wife interrupted him.

He turned, and saw her fall almost fainting against the door, her face whiter than her coif, her finger pointing to the path that led from Saint-Pavin to their cottage.

"The soldiers—they are coming!" she gasped.

Quicker than thought, Lacheneur and the peasant sprang to the door to see for themselves.

The young woman had spoken the truth.

The Montaignac chasseurs were climbing the steep foot-path slowly, but surely. Chupin walked in advance, urging them on with voice, gesture and example.

An imprudent word from the little shepherd-boy, whom M. Lacheneur had questioned, had decided the fugitive's fate.

On returning to Saint-Pavin, and hearing that the soldiers were searching for the chief conspirator, the lad chanced to say:

"I met a man just now on the mountain who asked me where he was; and I saw him go down the foot-path leading to Antoine's cottage."

And in proof of his words, he proudly displayed the piece of silver which Lacheneur had given him.

"One more bold stroke and we have our man!" exclaimed Chupin. "Come, comrades!"

And now the party were not more than two hundred feet from the house in which the proscribed man had found an asylum.

Antoine and his wife looked at each other with anguish in their eyes.

They saw that their visitor was lost.

"We must save him! we must save him!" cried the woman,

"Yes, we must save him!" repeated the husband, gloomily. "They shall kill me before I betray a man in my own house."

"If he would hide in the stable behind the bundles of straw——"

"They would find him! These soldiers are worse than tigers, and the wretch who leads them on must have the keen scent of a bloodhound."

He turned quickly to Lacheneur.

"Come, sir," said he, "let us leap from the back window and flee to the mountains. They will see us, but no matter! These horsemen are always clumsy runners. If you cannot run, I will carry you. They will probably fire at us, but they will miss us."

"And your wife?" asked Lacheneur.

The honest mountaineer shuddered; but he said:

"She will join us."

Lacheneur took his friend's hand and pressed it tenderly.

"Ah! you are noble people," he exclaimed, "and God will reward you for your kindness to a poor fugitive. But you have done too much already. I should be the basest of men if I consented to uselessly expose you to danger. I can bear this life no longer; I have no wish to escape."

He drew the sobbing woman to him and kissed her upon the forehead.

"I have a daughter, young and beautiful like yourself, as generous and proud. Poor Marie-Annie! And I have pitilessly sacrificed her to my hatred! I should not complain; come what may, I have deserved it."

The sound of approaching footsteps became more and more distinct. Lacheneur straightened himself up, and seemed to be gathering all his energy for the decisive moment.

"Remain inside," he said, imperiously, to Antoine and his wife. "I am going out; they must not arrest me in your house."

As he spoke, he stepped outside the door, with a firm tread, a dauntless brow, a calm and assured mien.

The soldiers were but a few feet from him.

"Halt!" he exclaimed, in a strong, ringing voice. "It is Lacheneur you are seeking, is it not? I am he! I surrender myself."

An unbroken stillness reigned. Not a sound, not a word replied.

The spectre of death that hovered above his head imparted such an imposing majesty to his person that the soldiers paused, silent and awed.

But there was one man who was terrified by this resonant voice, and that was Chupin.

Remorse filled his cowardly heart, and pale and trembling, he tried to hide behind the soldiers.

Lacheneur walked straight to him.

"So it is you who have sold my life, Chupin?" he said, scornfully. "You have not forgotten, I see plainly, how often Marie-Anne has filled your empty larder—and now you take your revenge."

The miserable wretch seemed crushed. Now that he had done this foul deed, he knew what treason really was.

"So be it," said M. Lacheneur. "You will receive the price of my blood; but it will not bring you good fortune—traitor!"

But Chupin, indignant with himself for

his weakness, was already trying to shake off the fear that mastered him.

"You have conspired against the king," he stammered. "I have done only my duty in denouncing you."

And turning to the soldiers, he said:

"As for you, comrades, you may rest assured that the duke de Sairmeuse will testify his gratitude for your services."

They had bound Lacheneur's hands, and the party were about to descend the mountain, when a man appeared, bareheaded, covered with perspiration, and panting for breath.

Twilight was falling, but M. Lacheneur recognized Balstain.

"Ah! you have him!" he exclaimed, as soon as he was within hearing distance, and pointing to the prisoner. "The reward belongs to me—I denounced him first on the other side of the frontier. The gendarmes at Saint-Jean-de-Coche will testify to that. He would have been captured last night in my house, but he ran away in my absence; and I have been following the bandit for sixteen hours."

He spoke with extraordinary vehemence and volubility, beside himself with fear lest he was about to lose his reward, and lest his treason would bring him nothing save disgrace and obloquy.

"If you have any right to the reward, you must prove it before the proper authorities," said the officer in command.

"If I have any right!" interrupted Balstain; "who contests my right, then?"

He looked threateningly around, and his eyes fell on Chupin.

"Is it you?" he demanded. "Do you dare to assert that you discovered the brigand?"

"Yes, it was I who discovered his hiding place."

"You lie, imposter!" vociferated the inn-keeper; "you lie!"

The soldiers did not move. This scene repaid them for the disgust they had experienced during the afternoon.

"But," continued Balstain, "what else could one expect from a vile knave like Chupin? Every one knows that he has been obliged to flee from France a dozen times on account of his crimes. Where did you take refuge when you crossed the frontier, Chupin?" In my house, in the inn kept by honest Balstain. You were fed and protected there. How many times have I saved you from the gendarmes and from the galleys? More times than I can count. And to reward me, you steal my property; you steal this man who was mine——"

"He is insane!" said the terrified Chupin, "he is mad!"

Then the inn-keeper changed his tactics.

"At least you will be reasonable," he exclaimed. "Let us see, Chupin, what you will do for an old friend? Divide, will you not? No, you say no? What will you give me, comrade? A third? Is that too much? A quarter, then——"

Chupin felt that all the soldiers were enjoying his terrible humiliation. They were sneering at him, and only an instant before they had avoided coming in contact with him with evident horror.

Transported with anger, he pushed Balstain violently aside, crying to the soldiers:

"Come—are we going to spend the night here?"

An implacable hatred gleamed in the eye of the Piedmontese.

He drew his knife from his pocket and making the sign of the cross in the air:

"Saint-Jean-de-Coche," he exclaimed, in a ringing voice, "and you, Holy Virgin, hear my vow. May my soul burn in hell if I ever use a knife at my repasts until I have plunged this, which I now hold, into the heart of the scoundrel who has defrauded me!"

Having said this, he disappeared in the woods, and the soldiers took up their line of march.

But Chupin was no longer the same. All his accustomed impudence had fled He walked on with bowed head, a prey to the most sinister presentiments.

He felt assured that an oath like that of Balstain's, and uttered by such a man, was equivalent to a death warrant, or at least to a speedy prospect of assassination.

This thought tormented him so much that he would not allow the detachment to spend the night at Saint-Pavin, as had been agreed upon. He was impatient to leave the neighborhood.

After supper Chupin sent for a cart; the prisoner, securely bound, was placed in it, and the party started for Montaignac.

The great bell was striking two when Lacheneur was brought into the citadel.

At that very moment M. d'Escorval and Corporal Bavois were making their preparations for escape.

CHAPTER LXXV.

ALONE in his cell, Chanlouineau, after Marie-Anne's departure, abandoned himself to the most frightful despair.

He had just given more than life to the woman he loved so fervently.

For had he not, in the hope of obtaining an interview with her, perilled his honor by simulating the most ignoble fear? While doing so, he thought only of the success of his ruse. But now he knew only too well what those who had witnessed his apparent weakness would say of him.

"This Chanlouineau is only a miserable coward after all," he fancied he could

hear them saying among themselves. "We have seen him on his knees, begging for mercy, and promising to betray his accomplices."

The thought that his memory would be tarnished with charges of cowardice and treason drove him nearly mad.

He actually longed for death, since it would give him an opportunity to retrieve his honor.

"They shall see, then," he cried, wrathfully, "if I turn pale and tremble before the soldiers."

He was in this state of mind when the door opened to admit the Marquis de Courtornieu, who, after seeing Mlle. Lacheneur leave the prison, came to Chanlouineau to ascertain the result of her visit.

"Well, my good fellow——" began the marquis, in his most condescending manner.

"Leave?" cried Chanlouineau, in a fury of passion. "Leave, or——"

Without waiting to hear the end of the sentence the marquis made his escape, greatly surprised and not a little dismayed by this sudden change.

"What a dangerous and bloodthirsty rascal!" he remarked to the guard. "It would, perhaps, be advisable to put him in a straight-jacket!"

Ah! there was no necessity for that. The heroic peasant had thrown himself upon his straw pallet, oppressed with feverish anxiety.

Would Marie-Anne know how to make the best use of the weapon which he had placed in her hands?

If he hoped so, it was because she would have as her counsellor and guide a man in whose judgment he had the most implicit confidence—Abbe Midon.

"Martial will be afraid of the letter," he said to himself, again and again; "certainly he will be afraid."

In this Chanlouineau was entirely mistaken. His discernment and intelligence were certainly above his station, but he was not sufficiently acute to read a character like that of the young Marquis de Sairmeuse.

The document which he had written in a moment of *abandon* and blindness, was almost without influence in determining his course.

He pretended to be greatly alarmed, in order to frighten his father; but in reality he considered the threat puerile.

Marie-Anne would have obtained the same assistance from him if she had not possessed this letter.

Other influences had decided him: the difficulties and dangers of the undertaking, the risks to be incurred, the prejudices to be braved.

To save the life of Baron d'Escorval—an enemy—to wrest him from the executioner on the very steps of the scaffold, as it were, seemed to him a delightful enterprise. And to assure the happiness of the woman he adored by saving the life of an enemy, even after his suit had been refused, seemed a chivalrous act worthy of him.

Besides, what an opportunity it afforded for the exercise of his *sang froid*, his diplomatic talent, and the *finesse* upon which he prided himself!

It was necessary to make his father his dupe. That was an easy task.

It was necessary to impose upon the credulity of the Marquis de Courtornieu. This was a difficult task, yet he succeeded.

But poor Chanlouineau could not conceive of such contradictions, and he was consumed with anxiety.

Willingly would he have consented to be put to the torture before receiving his death-blow, if he might have been allowed to follow Marie-Anne in her undertakings.

What was she doing? How could he ascertain?

A dozen times during the evening he called his guards, under every possible pretext, and tried to compel them to talk with him. He knew very well that these men could be no better informed on the subject than he was himself, that he could place no confidence in their reports—but that made no difference.

The drums beat for the evening roll-call, then for the extinguishment of lights—after that, silence.

Standing at the window of his cell, Chanlouineau concentrated all his faculties in a superhuman effort of attention.

It seemed to him, if the baron regained his liberty, he would be warned of it by some sign. Those whom he had saved owed him, he thought, this slight token of gratitude.

A little after two o'clock he heard sounds that made him tremble. There was a great bustle in the corridors; guards running to and fro, and calling each other, a rattling of keys, and the opening and shutting of doors.

The passage was suddenly illuminated; he looked out, and by the uncertain light of the lanterns, he thought he saw Lacheneur, as pale as a ghost, pass the cell, led by some soldiers.

Lacheneur! Could this be possible? He doubted his own eyesight. He thought it must be a vision born of the fever burning in his brain.

Later, he heard a despairing cry. But was it surprising that one should hear such a sound in a prison, where twenty men condemned to death were suffering the agony of that terrible night which precedes the day of execution.

At last, the gray light of early dawn came creeping in through the prison bars. Chanlouineau was in despair.

"The letter was useless!" he murmured.

Poor generous peasant! His heart would have leaped for joy could he have cast a glance on the court-yard of the citadel.

More than an hour had passed after the sounding of the *reveille*, when two countrywomen, who were carrying their butter and eggs to market, presented themselves at the gate of the fortress.

They declared that while passing through the fields at the base of the precipitous cliff upon which the citadel was built, they had discovered a rope dangling from the side of the rock. A rope! Then one of the condemned prisoners must have escaped. The guards hastened to Baron d'Escorval's room—it was empty.

The baron had fled, taking with him the man who had been left to guard him—Corporal Bavois, of the grenadiers.

The amazement was as intense as the indignation, but the fright was still greater.

There was not a single officer who did not tremble on thinking of his responsibility; not one who did not see his hopes of advancement blighted forever.

What should they say to the formidable Duke de Sairmeuse and to the Marquis de Courtornieu, who, in spite of his calm and polished manners, was almost as much to be feared. It was necessary to warn them, however, and a sergeant was dispatched with the news.

Soon they made their appearance, accompanied by Martial; all frightfully angry.

M. de Sairmeuse especially seemed beside himself.

He swore at everybody, accused everybody, threatened everybody.

He began by consigning all the keepers and guards to prison; he even talked of demanding the dismissal of all the officers.

"As for that miserable Bavois," he exclaimed—"as for that cowardly deserter, he shall be shot as soon as we capture him, and we will capture him, you may depend upon it!"

They had hoped to appease the duke's wrath a little, by informing him of Lacheneur's arrest; but he knew this already, for Chupin had ventured to awake him in the middle of the night to tell him the great news.

The baron's escape afforded the duke an opportunity to exalt Chupin's merits.

"The man who has discovered Lacheneur will know how to find this traitor D'Escorval," he remarked.

M. de Courtornieu, who was more calm, "took measures for the restoration of a great culprit to the hand of justice," as he said.

He sent couriers in every direction, ordering them to make close inquiries throughout the neighborhood.

His commands were brief, but to the point; they were to watch the frontier, to submit all travellers to a rigorous examination, to search the house, and to sow the description of D'Escorval broadcast through the land.

But first of all he ordered the arrest both of Abbe Midon—the Cure of Sairmeuse, and of the son of Baron d'Escorval.

Among the officers present there was one, an old lieutenant, medaled and decorated, who had been deeply wounded by imputations uttered by the Duke de Sairmeuse.

He stepped forward with a gloomy air, and said that these measures were doubtless all very well, but the most pressing and urgent duty was to institute an investigation at once, which, while acquainting them with the method of escape, would probably reveal the accomplices.

On hearing the word "investigation," neither the Duke de Sairmeuse nor the Marquis de Courtornieu could repress a slight shudder.

They could not ignore the fact that their reputations were at stake, and that the merest trifle might disclose the truth. A precaution neglected, the most insignificant detail, a word, a gesture might ruin their ambitious hopes forever.

They trembled to think that this officer might be a man of unusual shrewdness, who had suspected their simplicity, and was impatient to verify his presumptions.

No, the old lieutenant had not the slightest suspicion. He had spoken on the impulse of the moment, merely to give vent to his displeasure. He was not even keen enough to remark the rapid glance interchanged between the marquis and the duke.

Martial noticed this look, however, and with a politeness too studied not to be ridicule, he addressed the lieutenant:

"Yes we must institute an investigation; that suggestion is as shrewd as it is opportune," he remarked.

The old officer turned away with a muttered oath.

"That coxcomb is poking fun at me," he thought; "and he and his father and that prig deserve—but what is one to do?"

In spite of his bold remark, Martial felt that he must not incur the slightest risk.

To whom must the charge of this investigation be entrusted? To the duke and to the marquis, of course, since they were the only persons who would know just how much to conceal, and just how much to disclose.

They began their task immediately, with an *empressement* which could not fail

to silence all doubts, in case any existed in the minds of their subordinates.

But who could be suspicious? The success of the plot had been all the more certain from the fact that the baron's escape seemed likely to injure the interests of the very parties who had favored it.

Martial thought he knew the details of the escape as exactly as the fugitives themselves. He had been the author, even if they had been the actors, of the drama of the preceding night.

He was soon obliged to admit that he was mistaken in this opinion.

The investigation revealed facts which seemed incomprehensible to him.

It was evident that the Baron d'Escorval and Corporal Bavois had been compelled to accomplish two successive descents.

To do this the prisoners had realized (since they had succeeded) the necessity of having two ropes. Martial had provided them; the prisoners must have used them. And yet only one rope could be found—the one which the peasant woman had perceived hanging from the rocky platform, where it was made fast to an iron crowbar.

From the window to the platform, there was no rope

"This is most extraordinary!" murmured Martial, thoughtfully.

"Very strange!" approved M. de Cortornieu.

"How the devil could they have reached the base of the tower?"

"That is what I cannot understand."

But Martial found another cause for surprise.

On examining the rope that remained—the one which had been used in making the second descent—he discovered that it was not a single piece. Two pieces had been knotted together. The longest piece had evidently been too short.

How did this happen? Could the duke have made a mistake in the height of the cliff? or had the abbe measured the rope incorrectly?

But Martial had also measured it with his eye, and it had seemed to him that the rope was much longer, fully a third longer, than it now appeared.

"There must have been some accident," he remarked to his father and to the marquis; "but what?"

"Well, what does it matter?" replied the marquis, "you have the compromising letter, have you not?"

But Martial's was one of those minds that never rest when confronted by an unsolved problem.

He insisted on going to inspect the rocks at the foot of the precipice.

There they discovered large spots of blood.

"One of the fugitives must have fallen," said Martial, quickly, "and was dangerously wounded!"

"Upon my word!" exclaimed the Duke de Sairmeuse, "if Baron d'Escorval has broken his neck, I shall be delighted!"

Martial's face turned crimson, and he looked searchingly at his father.

"I suppose, monsieur, that you do not mean one word of what you are saying," Martial said, coldly. We pledged ourselves, upon the honor of our name, to save Baron d'Escorval. If he has been killed it will be a great misfortune for us, monsieur, a great misfortune."

When his son addressed him in his haughty and freezing tone the duke never knew how to reply. He was indignant, but his son's was the stronger nature.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed M. de Courtornieu; "if the rascal had merely been wounded we should have known it."

Such was the opinion of Chupin, who had been sent for by the duke, and who had just made his appearance.

But the old scoundrel, who was usually so loquacious and so officious, replied briefly; and, strange to say, did not offer his services.

Of his imperturbable assurance, of his wonted impudence, of his obsequious and cunning smile, absolutely nothing remained.

His restless eyes, the contraction of his features, his gloomy manner, and the occasional shudder which he could not repress, all betrayed his secret perturbation.

So marked was the change that even the Duke de Sairmeuse observed it.

"What calamity has happened to you, Master Chupin?" he inquired.

"This has happened," he responded, sullenly: "when I was coming here the children of the town threw mud and stones at me, and ran after me, shouting: 'Traitor! traitor!' "

He clenched his fists; he seemed to be meditating vengeance, and he added:

"The people of Montaignac are pleased. They know that the baron has escaped, and they are rejoicing."

Alas! this joy was destined to be of short duration, for this was the day appointed for the execution of the conspirators.

It was Wednesday.

At noon the gates of the citadel were closed, and the gloom was profound and universal, when the heavy rolling of drums announced the preparations for the frightful holocaust.

Consternation and fear spread through the town; the silence of death made itself felt on every side; the streets were deserted, and the doors and shutters of every house were closed.

At last, as three o'clock sounded, the gates of the fortress were opened to

give passage to fourteen doomed men, each accompanied by a priest.

Fourteen! for seized by remorse or fright at the last moment, M. de Courtornieu and the Duke de Sairmeuse had granted a reprieve to six of the prisoners, and at that very hour a courier was hastening towards Paris with six petitions for pardon, signed by the Military Commission.

Chanlouineau was not among those for whom royal clemency had been solicited.

When he left his cell, without knowing whether or not his letter had availed, he counted the condemned with poignant anxiety.

His eyes betrayed such an agony of anguish that the priest who accompanied him leaned towards him and whispered:

"For whom are you looking, my son?"

"For Baron d'Escorval."

"He escaped last night."

"Ah! now I shall die content!" exclaimed the heroic peasant.

He died as he had sworn he would die, without even changing color—calm and proud, the name of Marie-Anne upon his lips.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

Ah, well, there was one woman, a fair young girl, whose heart had not been touched by the sorrowful scenes of which Montaignac had been the theatre.

Mlle. Blanche de Courtornieu smiled as brightly as ever in the midst of a stricken people; and surrounded by mourners, her lovely eyes remained dry.

The daughter of a man who, for a week, exercised the power of a dictator, she did not lift her finger to save a single one of the condemned prisoners from the executioner.

They had stopped her carriage on the public road. This was a crime which Mlle. de Courtornieu could never forget.

She also knew that she owed it to Marie-Anne's intercession that she had not been held prisoner. This she could never forgive.

So it was with the bitterest resentment that, on the morning following her arrival in Montaignac, she recounted what she styled her "humiliations" to her father, *i. e.*—the inconceivable arrogance of that Lacheneur girl, and the frightful brutality of which the peasants had been guilty.

And when the Marquis de Courtornieu asked if she would consent to testify against Baron d'Escorval, she coldly replied:

"I think that such is my duty, and I shall fulfill it, however painful it may be."

She knew perfectly well that her deposition would be the baron's death-warrant; but she persisted in her resolve, veiling her hatred and her insensibility under the name of virtue.

But we must do her the justice to admit that her testimony was sincere.

She really believed that it was Baron d'Escorval who was with the rebels, and whose opinion Chanlouineau had asked.

This error on the part of Mlle. Blanche rose from the custom of designating Maurice by his Christian name, which prevailed in the neighborhood.

In speaking of him every one said "M. Maurice." When they said "M. d'Escorval," they referred to the baron.

After this crushing evidence against the accused had been written and signed in her fine and aristocratic handwriting, Mlle. de Courtornieu bore herself with partly real and partly affected indifference. She would not, on any account, have had people suppose that anything relating to these plebeians—these low peasants—could possibly disturb her proud serenity. She would not so much as ask a single question on the subject.

But this superb indifference was, in great measure, assumed. In her inmost soul she was blessing this conspiracy which had caused so many tears and so much blood to flow. Had it not removed her rival from her path?

"Now," she thought, "the marquis will return to me, and I will make him forget the bold creature who has bewitched him!"

Chimeras! The charm had vanished which had once caused the love of Martial de Sairmeuse to oscillate between Mlle. de Courtornieu and the daughter of Lacheneur.

Captivated at first by the charms of Mlle. Blanche, he soon discovered the calculating ambition and the utter worldliness concealed beneath such seeming simplicity and candor. Nor was he long in discerning her intense vanity, her lack of principle, and her unbounded selfishness; and, comparing her with the noble and generous Marie-Anne, his admiration was changed into indifference, or rather repugnance.

He did return to her, however, or at least he seemed to return to her, actuated, perhaps, by that inexplicable sentiment that impels us sometimes to do that which is most distasteful to us, and by a feeling of discouragement and despair, knowing that Marie-Anne was now lost to him forever.

He also said to himself that a pledge had been interchanged between the duke and the Marquis de Courtornieu; that he, too, had given his word, and that Mlle. Blanche was his betrothed.

Was it worth while to break this engagement? Would he not be compelled to marry some day? Why not fulfill the

pledge that had been made? He was as willing to marry Mlle. de Courtornieu as any one else, since he was sure that the only woman whom he had ever truly loved—the only woman whom he ever could love—was never to be his.

Master of himself when near her, and sure that he would ever remain the same, it was easy to play the part of lover with that perfection and that charm which—sad as it is to say it—the real passion seldom or never attains. He was assisted by his self-love, and also by that instinct of duplicity which leads a man to contradict his thoughts by his acts.

But while he seemed to be occupied only with thoughts of his approaching marriage, his mind was full of intense anxiety concerning Baron d'Escorval.

What had become of the baron and of Bavois after their escape? What had become of those who were awaiting them on the rocks—for Martial knew all their plans—Mme. d'Escorval and Marie-Anne, the abbe and Maurice, and the four officers?

There were, then, ten persons in all who had disappeared. And Martial asked himself again and again how it could be possible for so many individuals to mysteriously disappear, leaving no trace behind them.

"It unquestionably denotes a superior ability," thought Martial, "I recognize the hand of the priest."

It was, indeed, remarkable, since the search ordered by the Duke de Sairmeuse and the marquis had been pursued with feverish activity, greatly to the terror of those who had instituted it. Still what could they do? They had imprudently excited the zeal of their subordinates, and now they were unable to moderate it. But fortunately all efforts to discover the fugitives had proved unavailing.

One witness testified, however, that on the morning of the escape, he met, just before daybreak, a party of about a dozen persons, men and women, who seemed to be carrying a dead body.

This circumstance, taken in connection with the broken rope and the blood stains, made Martial tremble.

He had also been strongly impressed by another circumstance, which was revealed as the investigation progressed.

All the soldiers who were on guard that eventful night were interrogated. One of them testified as follows:

"I was on guard in the corridor communicating with the prisoner's apartment in the tower, when at about half-past two o'clock, after Lacheneur had been placed in his cell, I saw an officer approaching me. I challenged him; he gave me the countersign, and, naturally, I allowed him to pass. He went down the corridor, and entered the room adjoining that in which M. d Escorval was confined. He remained there about five minutes.

"Did you recognize this officer?" Martial eagerly inquired.

And the soldier answered: "No. He wore a large cloak, the collar of which was turned up so high that it covered his face to the very eyes."

"Who could this mysterious officer have been? What was he doing in the room where the ropes had been deposited?

Martial racked his brain to discover an answer to these questions.

The Marquis de Courtornieu himself seemed much disturbed.

"How could you be ignorant that there were many sympathizers with this movement in the garrison?" he said, angrily. "You might have known that this visitor, who concealed his face so carefully, was an accomplice who had been warned by Bavois, and who came to see if he needed a helping hand."

This was a plausible explanation, still it did not satisfy Martial.

"It is very strange," he thought, "that M. d'Escorval has not even deigned to let me know he is in safety. The service which I have rendered him deserves that acknowledgment, at least."

Such was his disquietude that he resolved to apply to Chupin, even though this traitor inspired him with extreme repugnance.

But it was no longer easy to obtain the services of the old spy. Since he had received the price of Lacheneur's blood—the twenty thousand francs which had so fascinated him—Chupin had deserted the house of the Duke de Sairmeuse.

He had taken up his quarters in a small inn on the outskirts of the town; and he spent his days alone in a large room on the second floor.

At night he barricaded the doors, and drank, drank, drank; and until daybreak they could hear him cursing and singing, or struggling against imaginary enemies.

Still he dared not disobey the order brought by a soldier, summoning him to the Hotel de Sairmeuse at once.

"I wish to discover what has become of Baron d'Escorval," said Martial.

Chupin trembled, he who had formerly been bronze, and a fleeting color dyed his cheeks.

"The Montaignac police are at your disposal," he answered sulkily. "They, perhaps, can satisfy the curiosity of Monsieur le Marquis. I do not belong to the police."

Was he in earnest, or was he endeavoring to augment the value of his services by refusing them? Martial inclined to the latter opinion.

"You shall have no reason to complain of my generosity," said he. "I will pay you well."

But on hearing the word "pay," which would have made his eyes gleam with delight a week before, Chupin flew into a furious passion.

"So it was to tempt me again that you summoned me here!" he exclaimed. "You would do better to leave me quietly at my inn."

"What do you mean, fool?"

But Chupin did not even hear this interruption, and, with increasing fury, he continued:

"They told me that, by betraying Lacheneur, I should be doing my duty and serving the king. I betrayed him, and now I am treated as if I had committed the worst of crimes. Formerly, when I lived by stealing and poaching, they despised me, perhaps; but they did not shun me as they did the pestilence. They called me rascal, robber, and the like; but they would drink with me all the same. To-day I have twenty thousand francs, and I am treated as if I were a venomous beast. If I approach a man, he draws back; if I enter a room, those who are there leave it."

The recollection of the insults he had received made him more and more frantic with rage.

"Was the act I committed so ignoble and abominable?" he pursued. "Then why did your father propose it? The shame should fall on him. He should not have tempted a poor man with wealth like that. If, on the contrary, I have done well, let them make laws to protect me."

Martial comprehended the necessity of reassuring this troubled mind.

"Chupin, my boy," said he, "I do not ask you to discover M. d'Escorval in order to denounce him; far from it—I only desire you to ascertain if any one at Saint-Pavin, or at Saint-Jean-de-Coche, knows of his having crossed the frontier."

On hearing the name Saint-Jean-de-Coche, Chupin's face blanched.

"Do you wish me to be murdered?" he exclaimed, remembering Balstain and his vow. "I would have you know that I value my life, now that I am rich."

And seized with a sort of panic he fled precipitately. Martial was stupefied with astonishment.

"One might really suppose that the wretch was sorry for what he had done," he thought.

If that was really the case, Chupin was not alone.

M. de Courtornieu and the Duke de Sairmeuse were secretly blaming themselves for the exaggerations in their first reports, and the manner in which they had magnified the proportions of the rebellion. They accused each other of undue haste, of neglect of the proper forms of procedure, and the injustice of the verdict rendered.

Each endeavored to make the other responsible for the blood which had been spilled: one tried to cast the public odium upon the other.

Meanwhile they were both doing their best to obtain a pardon for the six prisoners who had been reprieved.

They did not succeed.

One night a courier arrived at Montaignac, bearing the following laconic dispatch:

"The twenty-one convicted prisoners must be executed."

That is to say, the Duke de Richelieu, and the council of ministers, headed by M. Decazes, the minister of police, had decided that the petitions for clemency must be refused.

This dispatch was a terrible blow to the Duke de Sairmeuse and M. de Courtornieu. They knew, better than any one else, how little these poor men, whose lives they had tried, too late, to save, deserved death. They knew it would soon be publicly proven that two of the six men had taken no part whatever in the conspiracy.

What was to be done?

Martial desired his father to resign his authority; but the duke had not courage to do it.

M. de Courtornieu encouraged him. He admitted that all this was very unfortunate, but declared, since the wine had been drawn, that it was necessary to drink it, and that one could not draw back now without causing a terrible scandal.

The next day the dismal rolling of drums was again heard, and the six doomed men, two of whom were known to be innocent, were led outside the walls of the citadel and shot, on the same spot where, only a week before, fourteen of their comrades had fallen.

And the prime mover in the conspiracy had not yet been tried.

Confined in the cell next to that which Chanlouineau had occupied, Lacheneur had fallen into a state of gloomy despondency, which lasted during his whole term of imprisonment. He was terribly broken, both in body and in mind.

Once only did the blood mount to his pallid cheek, and that was on the morning when the Duke de Sairmeuse entered the cell to interrogate him.

"It was you who drove me to do what I did," he said. "God sees us, and judges us!"

Unhappy man! his faults had been great: his chastisement was terrible.

He had sacrificed his children on the altar of his wounded pride; he had not

even the consolation of pressing them to his heart and of asking their forgiveness before he died.

Alone in his cell, he could not distract his mind from thoughts of his son and of his daughter; but such was the terrible situation in which he had placed himself that he dared not ask what had become of them.

Through a compassionate keeper, he learned that nothing had been heard of Jean, and that it was supposed Marie-Anne had gone to some foreign country with the d'Escorval family.

When summoned before the court for trial, Lacheneur was calm and dignified in manner. He attempted no defense, but responded with perfect frankness. He took all the blame upon himself, and would not give the name of one of his accomplices.

Condemned to be beheaded, he was executed on the following day. In spite of the rain, he desired to walk to the place of execution. When he reached the scaffold, he ascended the steps with a firm tread, and, of his own accord, placed his head upon the block.

A few seconds later, the rebellion of the fourth of March counted its twenty-first victim.

And that same evening the people everywhere were talking of the magnificent rewards which were to be bestowed upon the Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu; and it was also asserted that the nuptials of the children of these great houses were to take place before the close of the week.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

THAT Martial de Sairmeuse was to marry Mlle. Blanche de Courtornieu did not surprise the inhabitants of Montaignac in the least.

But spreading such a report, with Lacheneur's execution fresh in the minds of every one, could not fail to bring odium upon these men who had held absolute power, and who had exercised it so mercilessly.

Heaven knows that M. de Courtornieu and the Duke de Sairmeuse were now doing their best to make the people of Montaignac forget the atrocious cruelty of which they had been guilty during their dictatorship.

Of the hundred or more who were confined in the citadel, only eighteen or twenty were tried, and they received only some very slight punishment; the others were released.

Major Carini, the leader of the conspirators in Montaignac, who had expected to lose his head, heard himself, with astonishment, sentenced to two years' imprisonment.

But there are crimes which nothing can efface or extenuate. Public opinion attributed this sudden clemency on the part of the duke and the marquis to fear.

People execrated them for their cruelty, and despised them for their apparent cowardice.

They were ignorant of this, however, and hastened forward the preparations for the nuptials of their children, without suspecting that the marriage was considered a shameless defiance of public sentiment on their part.

The seventeenth of April was the day which had been appointed for the bridal, and the wedding feast was to be held at the Chateau de Sairmeuse which, at a great expense, had been transformed into a fairy palace for the occasion.

It was in the church of the little village of Sairmeuse, on the loveliest of spring days that this marriage ceremony was performed by the cure who had taken the place of poor Abbe Midon.

At the close of the address to the newly wedded pair, the priest uttered these words, which he believed prophetic:

"You will be, you *must* be happy!"

Who would not have believed as he did? Where could two young people be found more richly dowered with all the attributes likely to produce happiness, *i. e.*—youth, rank, health, and riches.

But though an intense joy sparkled in the eyes of the new Marquis de Sairmeuse, there were those among the guests who observed the bridegroom's preoccupation. One might have supposed that he was making an effort to drive away some gloomy thought.

At the moment when his young wife hung upon his arm, proud and radiant, a vision of Marie-Anne rose before him, more life-like, more potent than ever.

What had become of her that she had not been seen at the time of her father's execution? Courageous as he knew her to be, if she had made no attempt to see her father, it must have been because she was ignorant of his approaching doom.

"Ah! if she had but loved him," Martial thought, "what happiness would have been his. But, now he was bound for life to a woman whom he did not love."

At dinner, however, he succeeded in shaking off the sadness that oppressed him, and when the guests rose to repair to the drawing-rooms, he had almost forgotten his dark forebodings.

He was rising in his turn, when a servant approached him with a mysterious air.

"Some one desires to see the marquis," whispered the valet.

"Who?"

"A young peasant who will not give his name."

"On one's wedding-day, one must grant an audience to everybody," said Martial.

And gay and smiling he descended the staircase.

In the vestibule, lined with rare and fragrant plants, stood a young man. He was very pale, and his eyes glittered with feverish brilliancy.

On recognizing him Martial could not restrain an exclamation of surprise.

"Jean Lacheneur!" he exclaimed; "imprudent man!"

The young man stepped forward.

"You believed that you were rid of me," he said, bitterly. "Instead, I return from afar. You can have your people arrest me if you choose."

Martial's face crimsoned at the insult; but he retained his composure.

"What do you desire?" he asked, coldly.

Jean drew from his pocket a folded letter.

"I am to give you this on behalf of Maurice d'Escorval."

With an eager hand, Martial broke the seal. He glanced over the letter, turned as pale as death, staggered and said only one word:

"Infamous!"

"What must I say to Maurice, insisted Jean. "What do you intend to do?"

With a terrible effort Martial had conquered his weakness. He seemed to deliberate for ten seconds, then seizing Jean's arm, he dragged him up the staircase, saying:

"Come—you shall see."

Martial's countenance had changed so much during the three minutes he had been absent that there was an exclamation of terror when he reappeared. holding an open letter in one hand and leading with the other a young peasant whom no one recognized.

"Where is my father?" he demanded, in a husky voice; "where is the Marquis de Courtornieu?"

The duke and the marquis were with Mme. Blanche in the little *salon* at the end of the main hall,

Martial hastened there, followed by a crowd of wondering guests, who, foreseeing a stormy scene, were determined not to lose a syllable.

He walked directly to M. de Courtornieu, who was standing by the fire-place, and handing him the letter:

"Read!" said he, in a terrible voice.

M. de Courtornieu obeyed. He became livid; the paper trembled in his hands: his eyes fell, and he was obliged to lean against the marble mantel for support.

"I do not understand," he stammered: "no, I do not understand."

The duke and Mme. Blanche both sprang forward.

"What is it?" they asked, in a breath; "what has happened?"

With a rapid movement, Martial tore the paper from the hands of the Marquis de Courtornieu, and addressing his father:

"Listen to this letter," he said, imperiously.

Three hundred people were assembled there, but the silence was so profound that the voice of the young marquis penetrated to the farthest extremity of the hall as he read:

"MONSIEUR LE MARQUIS—In exchange for a dozen lines that threatened you with ruin, you promised us, upon the honor of your name, the life of Baron d'Escorval,

"You did, indeed, bring the ropes by which he was to make his escape, but they had been previously cut. and my father was precipitated to the rocks below.

"You have forfeited your honor, monsieur. You have soiled your name with ineffaceable opprobrium. While so much as a drop of blood remains in my veins, I will leave no means untried to punish you for your cowardice and vile treason.

"By killing me you would, it is true, escape the chastisement I am reserving for you. Consent to fight with me. Shall I await you to-morrow on the Reche? At what hour? With what weapons?

"If you are the vilest of men, you can appoint a rendezvous, and then send your gendarmes to arrest me. That would be an act worthy of you.

MAURICE D'ESCORVAL."

The duke was in despair. He saw the secret of the baron's flight made public—his political prospects ruined.

"Hush!" he said, hurriedly, and in a low voice; "hush, wretched man, you will ruin us!"

But Martial seemed not even to hear him. When he had finished his reading:

"Now, what do you think?" he demanded, looking the Marquis de Courtornieu full in the face.

"I am still unable to comprehend," said the old nobleman, coldly.

Martial lifted his hand; every one believed that he was about to strike the man who had been his father-in-law only a few hours.

"Very well! *I* comprehend!' he exclaimed. "I know now who that officer was who entered the room in which I had deposited the ropes—and I know what took him there."

He crumbled the letter between his hands and threw it in M. de Courtornieu's face, saying:

"Here is your reward—coward!"

Overwhelmed by this denouement the marquis sank into an arm-chair, and Martial, still holding Jean Lacheneur by the arm, was leaving the room, when his young wife, wild with despair, tried to detain him.

"You shall not go!" she exclaimed, intensely exasperated; "you shall not! Where are you going? To rejoin the sister of this man, whom I now recognize?"

Beside himself, Martial pushed his wife roughly aside.

"Wretch!" said he, "how dare you insult the noblest and purest of women? Ah, well—yes—I am going to find Marie-Anne. Farewell!"

And he passed on.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

THE ledge of rock upon which Baron d'Escorval and Corporal Bavois rested in their descent from the tower was very narrow.

In the widest place it did not measure more than a yard and a half, and its surface was uneven, cut by innumerable fissures and crevices, and sloped suddenly at the edge. To stand there in the daytime, with the wall of the tower behind one, and the precipice at one's feet, would have been considered very imprudent.

Of course, the task of lowering a man from this ledge, at dead of night, was perilous in the extreme.

Before allowing the baron to descend, honest Bavois took every possible precaution to save himself from being dragged over the verge of the precipice by the weight he would be obliged to sustain.

He placed his crowbar firmly in a crevice of the rock, then bracing his feet against the bar, he seated himself firmly, throwing his shoulders well back, and it was only when he was sure of his position that he said to the baron:

"I am here, and firmly fixed, comrade; now let yourself down."

The sudden parting of the rope hurled the brave corporal rudely against the tower wall, then he was thrown forward by the rebound.

His unalterable *sang-froid* was all that saved him.

For more than a minute he hung suspended over the abyss into which the baron had just fallen, and his hands clutched at the empty air.

A hasty movement, and he would have fallen.

But he possessed a marvellous power of will, which prevented him from attempting any violent effort. Prudently, but with determined energy, he screwed his feet and his knees into the crevices of the rock, feeling with his hands for some point of support, and gradually sinking to one side, he finally succeeded in dragging himself from the verge of the precipice.

It was time, for a cramp seized him with such violence that he was obliged to sit down and rest for a moment.

That the baron had been killed by his fall, Bavois did not doubt for an instant. But this catastrophe did not produce much effect upon the old soldier, who had seen so many comrades fall by his side on the field of battle.

What did amaze him was the breaking of the rope—a rope so large that one would have supposed it capable of sustaining the weight of ten men like the baron.

As he could not, by reason of the darkness, see the ruptured place, Bavois felt it with his finger; and, to his inexpressible astonishment, he found it smooth. No filaments, no rough bits of hemp, as usual after a break; the surface was perfectly even.

The corporal comprehended what Maurice had comprehended below.

"The scoundrels have cut the rope!" he exclaimed, with a frightful oath.

And a recollection of what had happened three or four hours previous arose in his mind.

"This," he thought, "explains the noise which the poor baron heard in the next room! And I said to him: 'Nonsense! it is a rat!'"

Then he thought of a very simple method of verifying his conjectures. He passed the cord about the crowbar and pulled it with all his strength. It parted in three places.

This discovery appalled him.

A part of the rope had fallen with the unfortunate baron, and it was evident that the remaining fragments tied together would not be long enough to reach to the base of the rock.

From this isolated ledge it was impossible to reach the ground upon which the citadel was built,

"You are in a fine fix, corporal," he growled.

Honest Bavois looked the situation full in the face, and saw that it was desperate.

"Well, corporal, your jig is up!" he murmured. "At daybreak they will find that the baron's cell is empty. They will poke their heads out of the window, and they will see you here, like a stone saint upon his pedestal. Naturally, you will be captured, tried, condemned; and you will be led out to take your turn in the ditches. Ready! Aim! Fire! And that will be the end of your story."

He stopped short. A vague idea had

entered his mind, which he felt might possibly be his salvation.

It came to him in touching the rope which he had used in his descent from the prison to the ledge, and which, firmly attached to the bars, hung down the side of the tower.

"If you had that rope which hangs there useless, corporal, you could add it to these fragments, and then it would be long enough to carry you to the foot of the rock. But how shall I obtain it? It is certainly impossible to go back after it! and how can I pull it down when it is so securely fastened to the bars?"

He sought a way, found it, and pursued it, talking to himself all the while as if there were two corporals; one prompt to conceive, the other, a trifle stupid, to whom it was necessary to explain everything in detail.

"Attention, corporal," said he. "You are going to knot these five pieces of rope together and attach them to your waist; then you are going to climb up to that window, hand over hand. Not an easy matter! A carpeted staircase is preferable to that rope dangling there. But no matter, you are not finical, corporal! So you climb it, and here you are in the cell again. What are you going to do? A mere nothing. You are unfastening the cord attached to the bars; you will tie it to this, and that will give you eighty feet of good strong rope. Then you will pass the rope about one of the bars that remain intact; the rope will thus be doubled; then you let yourself down again, and when you are here, you have only to untie one of the knots, and the rope is at your service. Do you understand, corporal?"

The corporal did understand so well that in less than twenty minutes he was back again upon the narrow shelf of rock, the difficult and dangerous operation which he had planned accomplished.

Not without a terrible effort; not without torn and bleeding hands and knees.

But he had succeeded in obtaining the rope, and now he was certain that he could make his escape from his dangerous position. He laughed gleefully, or rather with that chuckle which was habitual to him.

Anxiety, then joy, had made him forget M. d'Escorval. At the thought of him, he was smitten with remorse.

"Poor man!" he murmured. "I shall succeed in saving my miserable life, for which no one cares, but I was unable to save him. Undoubtedly, by this time his friends have carried him away."

As he uttered these words he was leaning over the abyss. He doubted the evidence of his own senses when he saw a faint light moving here and there in the depths below.

What had happened? For something very extraordinary must have happened to induce intelligent men like the baron's friends to display this light, which, if observed from the citadel, would betray their presence and ruin them.

But Corporal Bavois's moments were too precious to be wasted in idle conjectures.

"Better go down on the double-quick," he said aloud, as if to spur on his courage. "Come, my friend, spit on your hands and be off!"

As he spoke the old soldier threw himself flat on his belly and crawled slowly backwards to the verge of the precipice. The spirit was strong, but the flesh shuddered. To march upon a battery had always been a mere pastime to the worthy corporal; but to face an unknown peril, to suspend one's life upon a cord, was a different matter.

Great drops of perspiration, caused by the horror of his situation, stood out upon his brow when he felt that half his body had passed the edge of the precipice, and that the slightest movement would now launch him into space.

He made this movement, murmuring:

"If there is a God who watches over honest people let Him open His eyes this instant!"

The God of the just was watching.

Bavois arrived at the end of his dangerous journey with torn and bleeding hands, but safe.

He fell like a mass of rock; and the rudeness of the shock drew from him a groan resembling the roar of an infuriated beast.

For more than a minute he lay there upon the ground stunned and dizzy.

When he rose two men seized him roughly.

"Ah, no foolishness," he said quickly. "It is I, Bavois."

This did not cause them to relax their hold.

"How does it happen," demanded one, in a threatening tone, "that Baron d' Escorval falls and you succeed in making the descent in safety a few moments later?"

The old soldier was too shrewd not to understand the whole import of this insulting question.

The sorrow and indignation aroused within him gave him strength to free himself from the hands of his captors.

"*Mille tonnerres*!" he exclaimed, "so I pass for a traitor, do I! No, it is impossible—listen to me."

Then rapidly, but with surprising clearness, he related all the details of his escape, his despair, his perilous situation, and the almost insurmountable obstacles which he had overcome. To hear was to believe.

The men—they were, of course, the retired army officers who had been wait-

ing for the baron—offered the honest corporal their hands, sincerely sorry that they had wounded the feelings of a man who was so worthy of their respect and gratitude.

"You will forgive us, corporal, "they said, sadly. "Misery renders men suspicious and unjust, and we are very unhappy."

"No offence," he growled. "If I had trusted poor M. d'Escorval, he would be alive now."

"The baron still breathes," said one of the officers.

This was such astounding news that Bavois was utterly confounded for a moment.

"Ah! I will give my right hand, if necessary, to save him!" he exclaimed, at last.

"If it is possible to save him, he will be saved, my friend. That worthy priest whom you see there, is an excellent physician. He is examining M. d'Escorval's wounds now. It was by his order that we procured and lighted this candle, which may bring our enemies upon us at any moment; but this is not a time for hesitation."

Bavois looked with all his eyes, but from where he was standing he could discover only a confused group of moving figures.

"I would like to see the poor man,' he said, sadly.

"Come nearer, my good fellow; fear nothing!"

He stepped forward, and by the flickering light of the candle which Marie-Anne held, he saw a spectacle which moved him more than the horrors of the bloodiest battle field.

The baron was lying upon the ground, his head supported on Mme. d'Escorval's knee.

His face was not disfigured; but he was pale as death itself, and his eyes were closed.

At intervals a convulsive shudder shook his frame, and a stream of blood gushed from his mouth.

His clothing was hacked—literally hacked in pieces; and it was easy to see that his body had sustained many frightful wounds.

Kneeling beside the unconscious man, Abbe Midon, with admirable dexterity, was staunching the blood and applying bandages which had been torn from the linen of those present.

Maurice and one of the officers were assisting him.

"Ah! if I had my hands on the scoundrel who cut the rope," cried the corporal, in a passion of indignation; "but patience. I shall have him yet."

"Do you know who it was?"

"Only too well!"

He said no more. The abbe had done all it was possible to do, and he now lifted the wounded man a little higher on Mme. d'Escorval's knee.

This change of position elicited a moan that betrayed the unfortunate baron's intense sufferings. He opened his eyes and faltered a few words—they were the first he had uttered.

"Firmin!" he murmured, "Firmin!"

It was the name of the baron's former secretary, a man who had been absolutely devoted to his master, but who had been dead for several years.

It was evident that the baron's mind was wandering. Still he had some vague idea of his terrible situation, for in a stifled, almost inaudible voice, he added:

"Oh! how I suff r! Firmin, I will not fall into the hands of the Marquis de Courtornieu alive. You shall kill me rather—do you hear me? I command it."

This was all; then his eyes closed ag in, and his head fell back a dead weight. One would have supposed that he had yielded up his last sigh.

Such was the opinion of the officers: and it was with poignant anxiety they drew the abbe a little aside.

"Is it all over?" they asked. "Is there any hope?"

The priest sadly shook his head, and pointing to heaven:

"My hope is in God!" he said, reverently.

The hour, the place, the terrible catastrophe, the present danger, the threatening future, all combined to lend a deep solemnity to the words of the priest.

So profound was the impression that, for more than a minute, these men, familiar with peril and scenes of horror, stood in awed silence.

Maurice, who approached, followed by Corporal Bavois, brou ht them back to the exigencies of the present.

"Ought we not to make haste and carry away my father?" he asked. "Must we not be in Piedmont before evening?"

"Yes!" exclaimed the officers, "let us start at once."

But the priest did not move, and in a despondent voice, he said:

"To make any attempt to carry M. d' Escorval across the frontier in his present condition would cost him his life."

This seemed so inevitably a death-warrant for them all, that they shuddered.

"My God! what shall we do?" faltered Maurice. "What course shall we pursue?"

Not a voice replied. It was clear that they hoped for salvation through the priest alone.

He was lost in thought, and it was some time before he spoke.

"About an hour's walk from here," he said, at last, "beyond the Croix-d'Arcy,

is the hut of a peasant upon whom I can rely. His name is Poignot; and he was formerly in M. Lacheneur's employ. With the assistance of his three sons, he now tills quite a large farm. We must procure a litter and carry M. d'Escorval to the house of this honest peasant."

"What, monsieur," interrupted one of the officers, "you wish us to procure a litter at this hour of the night, and in this neighborhood?"

"It must be done."

"But, will it not awaken suspicion?"

"Most assuredly."

"The Montaignac police will follow us."

"I am certain of it."

The baron will be recaptured?"

"No."

The abbe spoke in the tone of a man who, by virtue of assuming all the responsibility, feels that he has a right to be obeyed.

"When the baron has been conveyed to Poignot's house," he continued, "one of you gentlemen will take the wounded man's place upon the litter; the others will carry him, and the party will remain together until it has reached Piedmontese territory. Then you will separate and pretend to conceal yourselves, but do it in such a way that you are seen everywhere."

All present comprehended the priest's simple plan.

They were to throw the emissaries sent by the Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu off the track; and at the very moment it was apparently proven that the baron was in the mountains, he would be safe in Poignot's house.

"One word more," added the priest. "It will be necessary to make the *cortege* which accompanies the pretended baron resemble as much as possible the little party that would be likely to attend M. d'Escorval. Mlle. Lacheneur will accompany you; Maurice also. People know that I would not leave the baron, who is my friend; my priestly robe would attract attention; one of you must assume it. God will forgive this deception on account of its worthy motive.

It was now necessary to procure the litter; and the officers were trying to decide where they should go to obtain it, when Corporal Bavois interrupted them.

"Give yourselves no uneasiness," he remarked; "I know an inn not far from here where I can procure one."

He departed on the run, and five minutes later re-appeared with a small litter, a thin mattress, and a coverlid. He had thought of everything.

The wounded man was lifted carefully and placed upon the mattress.

A long and difficult operation which, in spite of extreme caution, drew many terrible groans from the baron.

When all was ready, each officer took an end of the litter, and the little procession, headed by the abbe, started on its way. They were obliged to proceed slowly on account of the suffering which the least jolting inflicted upon the baron. Still they made some progress, and by daybreak they were about half way to Poignot's house.

It was then that they met some peasants going to their daily toil. Both men and women paused to look at them, and when the little *cortege* had passed they still stood gazing curiously after these people who were apparently carrying a dead body.

The priest did not seem to trouble himself in regard to these encounters; at least, he made no attempt to avoid them.

But he did seem anxious and cautious when, after a three hours' march, they came in sight of Poignot's cottage.

Fortunately there was a little grove not far from the house. The abbe made the party enter it, recommending the strictest prudence, while he went on in advance to confer with this man, upon whose decision the safety of the whole party depended.

As the priest approached the house, a small, thin man with gray hair and a sunburned face emerged from the stable.

It was Father Poignot.

"What! is this you, Monsieur le Cure!" he exclaimed, delightedly. "Heavens! how pleased my wife will be. We have a great favor to ask of you——"

And then, without giving the abbe an opportunity to open his lips, he began to tell him his perplexities. The night of the revolt he had given shelter to a poor man who had received an ugly sword-thirst. Neither his wife nor himself knew how to dress the wound, and he dared not call in a physician.

"And this wounded man," he added, "is Jean Lacheneur, the son of my former employer."

A terrible anxiety seized the priest's heart.

Would this man, who had already given an asylum to one wounded conspirator, consent to receive another?

The abbe's voice trembled as he made known his petition.

The farmer turned very pale and shook his head gravely, while the priest was speaking. When the abbe had finished:

"Do you know, sir," he asked, coldly, "that I incur a great risk by converting my house into a hospital for these rebels?"

The abbe dared not answer.

"They told me," Father Poignot continued, "that I was a coward, because I would not take part in the revolt. Such was not my opinion. Now I choose to shel-

ter these wounded men—I shelter them. In my opinion, it requires quite as much courage as it does to go and fight."

"Ah! you are a brave man!" cried the abbe.

"I know that very well! Bring M. d'Escorval. There is no one here but my wife and boys—no one will betray him!"

A half hour later the baron was lying in a small loft, where Jean Lacheneur was already installed.

From the window, Abbe Midon and Mme. d'Escorval watched the lit le *cortege*, organized for the purpose of deceiving the Duke de Sairmeuse's spies, as it moved rapidly away.

Corporal Bavois, with his head bound up with blood-stained linen, had taken the baron's place upon the litter.

This was one of the troubled epoch's in history that try men's souls. There is no chance for hypocrisy; each man stands revealed in his grandeur, or in his pettiness of soul.

Certainly much cowardice was displayed during the early days of the second Restoration; but many deeds of sublime courage and devotion were performed.

These officers who befriended Mme. d'Escorval and Maurice—who lent their aid to the abbe—knew the baron only by name and reputation.

It was sufficient for them to know that he was the friend of their former ruler—the man whom they had made their idol, and they rejoiced with all their hearts when they saw M. d'Escorval reposing under Father Poignot's roof in comparative security.

After this, their task, which consisted in misleading the government emissaries, seemed to them mere child's play.

But all these precautions were unnecessary. Public sentiment had declared itself in an unmistakable manner, and it was evident that Lacheneur's hopes had not been without some foundation.

The police discovered nothing, not so much as a single detail of the escape. They did not even hear of the little party that had traveled nearly three leagues in the full light of day, bearing a wounded man upon a litter.

Among the two thousand peasants who believed that this wounded man was Baron d'Escorval, there was not one who turned informer or let drop an indiscreet word.

But on approaching the frontier, which they knew to be strictly guarded, the fugitives became even more cautious.

They waited until nightfall before presenting themselves at a lonely inn, where they hoped to procure a guide to lead them through the defiles of the mountains.

Frightful news awaited them there. The inn-keeper informed them of the bloody massacre at Montaignac.

With tears rolling down his cheeks, he related the details of the execution, which he had heard from an eye-witness.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, he knew nothing of M. d'Escorval's flight or of M. Lacheneur's arrest.

But he was well acquainted with Chanlouineau, and he was inconsolable over the death of that "handsome young fellow, the best farmer in the country."

The officers, who had left the litter a short distance from the inn, decided that they could confide at least a part of their secret to this man.

"We are carrying one of our wounded comrades," they said to him. "Can you guide us across the frontier to-night?"

The inn-keeper replied that he would do so very willingly, that he would promise to take them safely past the military posts; but that he would not think of going upon the mountain before the moon rose.

By midnight the fugitives were *en route;* by daybreak they set foot on Piedmont territory.

They had dismissed their guide some time before. They now proceeded to break the litter in pieces; and handful by handful they cast the wool of the mattress to the wind.

"Our task is accomplished," the officer said to Maurice. "We will now return to France. May God protect you! Farewell!"

It was with tears in his eyes that Maurice saw these brave men, who had just saved his father's life, depart. Now he was the sole protector of Marie-Anne, who, pale and overcome with fatigue and emotion, trembled on his arm.

But no—Corporal Bavois still lingered by his side.

"And you, my friend," he asked, sadly, "what are you going to do?"

"Follow you," replied the old soldier. "I have a right to a home with you; that was agreed between your father and myself! So do not hurry, the young lady does not seem well, and I see the village only a short distance away."

CHAPTER LXXIX.

ESSENTIALLY a woman in grace and beauty, as well as in devotion and tenderness, Marie-Anne was capable of a virile bravery. Her energy and her coolness during those trying days had been the admiration and the astonishment of all around her.

But human endurance has its limits. Always after excessive efforts comes a moment when the shrinking flesh fails the firmest will.

When Marie-Anne tried to begin her journey anew, she found that her strength was exhausted; her swollen feet would no longer sustain her, her limbs sank under her, her head whirled, and an intense freezing coldness crept over her heart.

Maurice and the old soldier were obliged to support her, almost carry her. Fortunately they were not far from the village, whose church tower they had discerned through the gray mists of morning.

Soon the fugitives could distinguish the houses on the outskirts of the town. The corporal suddenly stopped short with an oath.

"*Mille tonnerres!*" he exclaimed; "and my uniform! To enter the village in this rig would excite suspicion at once; before we had a chance to sit down, the Piedmontese gendarmes would arrest us."

He reflected for a moment, twirling his moustache furiously; then, in a tone that would have made a passer-by tremble, he said:

"All things are fair in love and war. The next peasant who passes——"

"But I have money," interrupted Maurice, unbuckling a belt filled with gold, which he had put on under his clothing on the night of the revolt.

"Eh! we are fortunate!" cried Bavois. "Give me some, and I will soon find some shop in the suburbs where I can purchase a change of clothing.

He departed; but it was not long before he re-appeared, transformed by a peasant's costume, which fitted him perfectly. His small, thin face was almost hidden beneath an immense broad-brimmed hat.

"Now, steady, forward, march!" he said to Maurice and Marie-Anne, who scarcely recognized him in this disguise.

The town, which they soon reached, was called Saliente. They read the name upon a guide-post.

The fourth house after entering the place was a hostelry, the Traveler's Rest. They entered it, and ordered the hostess to take the young lady to a room and to assist her in disrobing.

The order was obeyed, and Maurice and the corporal went into the dining-room and ordered something to eat.

The desired refreshments were served, but the glances cast upon the guests were by no means friendly. It was evident that they were regarded with suspicion.

A large man, who was apparently the proprietor of the house, hovered around them, and at last embraced a favorable opportunity to ask their names.

"My name is Dubois," replied Maurice, without the slightest hesitation. "I am travelling on business, and this man here is my farmer."

These replies seemed to reassure the host a little.

"And what is your business?" he inquired.

"I came into this land of inquisitive people to buy mules," laughed Maurice, striking his belt of money.

On hearing the jingle of the coin the man lifted his cap deferentially. Raising mules was the chief industry of the country. This bourgeois was very young, but he had a well-filled purse, and that was enough.

"You will excuse me," resumed the host, in quite a different tone. "You see, we are obliged to be very careful. There has been some trouble in Montaignac."

The imminence of the peril and the responsibility devolving upon him, gave Maurice an assurance unusual to him; and it was in the most careless, off-hand manner possible that he concocted a quite plausible story to explain his early arrival on foot accompanied by a sick wife. He congratulated himself upon his address, but the old corporal was far from satisfied.

"We are too near the frontier to bivouac here," he grumbled. "As soon as the young lady is on her feet again we must hurry on."

He believed, and Maurice hoped, that twenty-four hours of rest would restore Marie-Anne.

They were mistaken. The very springs of life in her existence seemed to have been drained dry. She did not appear to suffer, but she remained in a death-like torpor, from which nothing could arouse her. They spoke to her but she made no response. Did she hear? did she comprehend? It was extremely doubtful.

By rare good fortune the mother of the proprietor proved to be a good, kind-hearted old woman, who would not leave the bed-side of Marie-Anne—of Mme. Dubois, as she was called at the Traveler's Rest.

It was not until the evening of the third day that they heard Marie-Anne utter a word.

"Poor girl!" she sighed; "poor, wretched girl!"

It was of herself that she spoke.

By a phenomenon not very unusual after a crisis in which reason has been temporarily obscured, it seemed to her that it was some one else who had been the victim of all the misfortunes, whose recollections gradually returned to her like the memory of a painful dream.

What strange and terrible events had taken place since that August Sabbath, when, on leaving the church with her father, she heard of the arrival of the Duke de Sairmeuse.

And that was only eight months ago.

What a difference between those days when she lived happy and envied in that beautiful Chateau de Sairmeuse, of which she believed herself the mistress, and at the present time, when she found herself lying in the comfortless room of a miserable country inn, attended by an old woman whom she did not know, and with no other protection than that of an old soldier—a deserter, whose life was in constant danger—and that of her proscribed lover.

From this total wreck of her cherished ambitions, of her hopes, of her fortune, of her happiness, and of her future, she had not even saved her honor.

But was she alone responsible? Who had imposed upon her the odious role which she had played with Maurice, Martial, and Chanlouineau?

As this last name darted through her mind, the scene in the prison cell rose suddenly and vividly before her.

Chanlouineau had given her a letter, saying as he did so:

"You will read this when I am no more."

She might read it now that he had fallen beneath the bullets of the soldiery. But what had become of it? From the moment that he gave it to her until now she had not once thought of it.

She raised herself in bed, and in an imperious voice:

"My dress," she said to the old nurse, seated beside her; "give me my dress."

The woman obeyed, with an eager hand Marie-Anne examined the pocket.

She uttered an exclamation of joy on finding the letter there.

She opened it, read it slowly twice, then, sinking back on her pillows, she bust into tears.

Maurice anxiously approached her.

What is the matter?" he inquired anxiously.

She handed him the letter, saying: "Read."

Chanlouineau was only a poor peasant. His entire education had been derived from an old country pedagogue, whose school he attended for three winters, and who troubled himself much less about the progress of his students than about the size of the books which they carried to and from the school.

This letter which was written upon the commonest kind of paper, was sealed with a huge wafer, as large as a two-sou piece, which he had purchased from a grocer in Sairmeuse.

The chirography was labored, heavy and trembling; it betrayed the stiff hand of a man more accustomed to guiding the plow than the pen.

The lines zig-zagged towards the top or towards the bottom of the page, and faults of orthography were everywhere apparent.

But if the writing was that of a vulgar peasant, the thoughts it expressed were worthy of the noblest, the proudest in the land.

This was the letter which Chanlouineau had written, probably on the eve of the insurrection.

"MARIE-ANNE—The outbreak is at hand. Whether it succeeds, or whether it fails, I shall die. That was decided on the day when I learned that you could marry none other than Maurice d'Escorval.

"But the conspiracy will not succeed; and I understand your father well enough to know that he will not survive its defeat. And if Maurice and your brother should both be killed, what would become of you? Oh, my God, would you not be reduced to beggary?

"The thought has haunted me continually. I have reflected, and this is my last will:

"I give and bequeath to you all my property, all that I possess:

"My house, the Borderie, with the gardens and vineyards pertaining thereto, the woodland and the pastures of Berarde, and five lots of land at Valrollier.

"You will find an inventory of this property, and of my other possessions which I devise to you, deposited with the lawyer at Sairmeuse.

"You can accept this bequest without fear; for, having no parents, my control over my property is absolute.

"If you do not wish to remain in France, this property will sell for at least forty thousand francs.

"But it would, it seems to me, be better for you to remain in your own country. The house on the Borderie is comfortable and convenient, since I have had it divided into three rooms and thoroughly repaired.

"Up-stairs is a room that has been fitted up by the best upholsterer in Montaignac. I intended it for you. Beneath the hearth-stone in this room you will find a box containing three hundred and twenty-seven louis d'or and one hundred and forty-six livres."

"If you refuse this gift, it will be because you scorn me even after I am dead. Accept it, if not for your own sake, for the sake of—I dare not write it; but you will understand my meaning only too well.

"If Maurice is not killed, and I shall try my best to stand between him and danger, he will marry you. Then you will, perhaps, be obliged to ask his consent in order to accept my gift. I hope that he will not refuse it. One is not jealous of the dead!

"Besides, he knows well that you have scarcely vouchsafed a glance to the poor peasant who has loved you so much.

"Do not be offended at anything I have said, I am in such agony that I cannot weigh my words.

"Adieu, adieu, Marie-Anne.

"CHANLOUINEAU."

Maurice also read twice, before handing it back, this letter whose every word palpitated with sublime passion.

He was silent for a moment, then, in a husky voice, he said:

"You cannot refuse; it would be wrong."

His emotion was so great that he could not conceal it, and he left the room.

He was overwhelmed by the grandeur of soul exhibited by this peasant, who, after saving the life of his successful rival at the Croix-d'Arcy, had wrested Baron d'Escorval from the hands of his executioners, and who had never allowed a complaint nor a reproach to escape his lips, and whose protection over the woman he adored extended even from beyond the grave.

In comparison with this obscure hero, Maurice felt himself insignificant, mediocre, unworthy.

Good God! what if this comparison should arise in Marie-Anne's mind as well? How could he compete with the memory of such nobility of soul and heroic self-sacrifice?

Chanlouineau was mistaken; one may, perhaps, be jealous of the dead!

But Maurice took good care to conceal this poignant anxiety and these sorrowful thoughts, and during the days that followed, he presented himself in Marie-Anne's room with a calm, even cheerful face.

For she, unfortunately, was not restored to health. She had recovered the full possession of her mental faculties, but her strength had not yet returned. She was still unable to sit up; and Maurice was forced to relinquish all thought of quitting Saliente, though he felt the earth burn beneath his feet.

This persistent weakness began to astonish the old nurse. Her faith in herbs, gathered by the light of the moon, was considerably shaken.

Honest Bavois was the first to suggest the idea of consulting a physician whom he had found in this land of savages.

Yes; he had found a really skillful physician in the neighborhood, a man of superior ability. Attached at one time to the beautiful court of Prince Eugene, he had been obliged to flee from Milan, and had taken refuge in this secluded spot.

This physician was summoned, and promptly made his appearance. He was one of those men whose age it is impossible to determine. His past, whatever it might have been, had wrought deep furrows on his brow, and his glance was as keen and piercing as his lancet.

After visiting the sick-room, he drew Maurice aside.

"Is this young lady really your wife, Monsieur—Dubois?"

He hesitated so strangely over this name, Dubois, that Maurice felt his face crimson to the roots of his hair.

"I do not understand your question," he retorted, angrily.

"I beg your pardon, of course, but you seem very young for a married man, and your hands are too soft to belong to a farmer. And when I spoke to this young lady of her husband, she blushed scarlet. The man who accompanies you has terrible moustaches for a farmer. Besides, you must remember that there have been troubles across the frontier at Montaignac."

From crimson Maurice had turned white. He felt that he was discovered—that he was in this man's power.

What should he do?

What good would denial do?

He reflected that confession is sometimes the height of prudence, and that extreme confidence often meets with sympathy and protection; so, in a voice trembling with anxiety, he said:

"You are not mistaken, monsieur. My friend and myself both are fugitives, undoubtedly condemned to death in France at this moment."

And without giving the doctor time to respond, he narrated the terrible events that had happened at Sairmeuse, and the history of his unfortunate love affair.

He omitted nothing. He neither concealed his own name nor that of Marie-Anne.

When his recital was completed, the physician pressed his hand.

"It is just as I supposed," said he. "Believe me, Monsieur—Dubois, you must not tarry here. What I have discovered others will discover. And above all, do not warn the hotel-keeper of your departure. He has not been deceived by your explanation. Self-interest alone has kept his mouth closed. He has seen your money, and so long as you spend it at his house he will hold his tongue; but if he discovers that you are going away, he will probably betray you."

"Ah! sir, but how is it possible for us to leave this place?"

"In two days the young lady will be on her feet again," interrupted the physician. "And take my advice. At the next village, stop and give your name to Mlle. Lacheneur."

"Ah! sir," Maurice exclaimed; "have you considered the advice you offer me? How can I, a proscribed man—a man condemned to death perhaps—how can I obtain the necessary papers?"

The physician shook his head.

"Excuse me, you are no longer in France, Monsieur d'Escorval, you are in Piedmont."

"Another difficulty!"

"No, because in this country, people marry, or at least they can marry, without all the formalities that cause you so much anxiety."

"Is it possible?" Maurice exclaimed.

"Yes, if you can find a priest who will consent to your union, inscribe your name upon his parish register and give you a certificate, you will be so indissolubly united, Mlle. Lacheneur and you, that the court of Rome would never grant you a divorce."

To suspect the truth of these affirmations was difficult, and yet Maurice doubted still.

"So, sir," he said, hesitatingly, "in case I was able to find a priest——"

The physician was silent. One might have supposed he was blaming himself for meddling with matters that did not concern him.

Then, almost brusquely, he said:

"Listen to me attentively, Monsieur d'Escorval. I am about to take my leave, but before I go, I shall take occasion to recommend a good deal of exercise for the sick lady—I will do this before your host. Consequently, day after to-morrow, Wednesday, you will hire mules, and you, Mlle. Lacheneur and your old friend, the soldier, will leave the hotel as if going on a pleasure excursion. You will push on to Vigano, three leagues from here, where I live. I will take you to a priest, one of my friends; and he, upon my recommendation, will perform the marriage ceremony. Now reflect, shall I expect you on Wednesday?"

"Oh, yes, yes, monsieur. How can I ever thank you?"

"By not thanking me at all. See, here is the inn-keeper; you are M. Dubois, again."

Maurice was intoxicated with joy. He understood the irregularity of such a marriage, but he knew it would reassure Marie-Anne's troubled conscience. Poor girl! she was suffering an agony of remorse. It was that which was killing her.

He did not speak to her on the subject, however, fearing something might occur to interfere with the project.

But the old physician had not given his word lightly, and everything took place as he had promised.

The priest at Vigano blessed the marriage of Maurice d'Escorval and of Marie-Anne Lacheneur, and after inscribing their names upon the church register, he gave them a certificate, upon which the physician and Corporal Bavois figured as witnesses.

That same evening the mules were sent back to Saliente, and the fugitives resumed their journey.

Abbe Midon had counselled them to reach Turin as quickly as possible.

"It is a large city," he said; "you will be lost in the crowd. I have more than one friend there, whose name and address are upon this paper. Go to them, and in that way I will try to send you news of your father."

So it was towards Turin that Maurice, Marie-Anne, and Corporal Bavois directed their steps.

But their progress was very slow, for they were obliged to avoid frequented roads, and renounce the ordinary modes of transportation.

The fatigue of travel, instead of exhausting Marie-Anne, seemed to revive her. After five or six days the color came back to her cheek and her strength returned.

"Fate seems to have relaxed her rigor," said Maurice, one day. "Who knows what compensations the future may have in store for us!"

No, fate had not taken pity upon them; it was only a short respite granted by destiny. One lovely April morning the fugitives stopped for breakfast at an inn on the outskirts of a large city.

Maurice having finished his repast was just leaving the table to settle with the hostess, when a despairing cry arrested him.

Marie-Anne, deadly pale, and with eyes staring wildly at a paper which she held in her hand, excla med in frenzied tones:

"Here! Maurice! Look!"

It was a French journal about a fortnight old, which had probably been left there by some traveler.

Maurice seized it and read:

"Yesterday, Lacheneur, the leader of the revolt in Montaignac, was executed. The miserable mischief-maker exhibited upon the scaffold the audacity for which he has always been famous."

"My father has been put to death!" cried Marie-Anne, "and I—his daughter—was not there to receive his last farewell!"

She rose, and in an imperious voice:

"I will go no farther," she said; "we must turn back now without losing an instant. I wish to return to France."

To return to France was to expose themselves to frightful peril. What good would it do? Was not the misfortune irreparable?

So Corporal Bavois suggested, very timidly. The old soldier trembled at the thought that they might suspect him of being afraid.

But Maurice would not listen.

He shuddered. It seemed to him that Baron d'Escorval must have been discovered and arrested at the same time that Lacheneur was captured.

"Yes, let us start at once on our return!" he exclaimed.

They immediately procured a carriage to convey them to the frontier. One important question, however, remained to be decided. Should Maurice and Marie-Anne make their marriage public? She wished to do so, but Maurice entreated her, with tears in his eyes, to conceal it.

"Our marriage certificate will not silence the evil disposed." said he. "Let us keep our secret for the present. We shall doubtless remain in France only a few days."

Unfortunately, Marie-Anne yielded.

"Since you wish it," said she, "I will obey you. No one shall know it."

The next day, which was the seventeenth of April, the fugitives at nightfall reached Father Poignot's house.

Maurice and Corporal Bavois were disguised as peasants.

The old soldier had made one sacrifice that drew tears from his eyes; he had shaved off his moustache.

CHAPTER LXXX.

WHEN Abbe Midon and Martial de Sairmeuse held their conference, to discuss and to decide upon the arrangements for the Baron d'Escorval's escape, a difficulty presented itself which threatened to break off the negotiation.

"Return my letter," said Martial, "and I will save the baron."

"Save the baron," replied the abbe, and your letter shall be returned."

But Martial's was one of those natures which become exasperated by the least shadow of suspicion.

The idea that any one should suppose him influenced by threats, when in reality, he had yielded only to Marie-Anne's tears, angered him beyond endurance.

"These are my last words, monsieur," he said, emphatically. "Restore to me, now, this instant, the letter which was obtained from me by Chanlouineau's ruse, and I swear to you, by the honor of my name, that all which it is possible for any human being to do to save the baron, I will do. If you distrust my word, good-evening."

The situation was desperate, the danger imminent, the time limited; Martial's tone betrayed an inflexible determination.

The abbe could not hesitate. He drew the letter from his pocket and handing it to Martial:

"Here it is, monsieur," he said, solemnly, "remember that you have pledged the honor of your name."

"I will remember it. Monsieur le Cure. Go and obtain the ropes."

The abbe's sorrow and amazement were intense, when, after the baron's terrible fall, Maurice announced that the cord had been cut. And yet he could not make up his mind that Martial was guilty of the execrable act. It betrayed a depth of duplicity and hypocrisy which is rarely found in men under twenty-five years of age. But no one suspected his secret thoughts. It was with the most unalterable *sang-froid* that he dressed the baron's wounds and made arrangements for the flight. Not until he saw M. d'Escorval installed in Poignot's house did he breathe freely.

The fact that the baron had been able to endure the journey, proved that in this poor maimed body remained a power of vitality for which the priest had not dared to hope.

Some way must now be discovered to procure the surgical instruments and the remedies which the condition of the wounded man demanded.

But where and how could he procure them?

The police kept a close watch over the physicians and druggists in Montaignac, in the hope of discovering the wounded conspirators through them.

But the cure, who had been for ten years physician and surgeon for the poor of his parish, had an almost complete set of surgical instruments and a well-filled medicine chest.

"This evening," said he, "I will obtain what is needful."

When night came, he put on a long, blue blouse, shaded his face by an immense slouch hat, and directed his steps toward Sairmeuse.

Not a light was visible through the windows of the presbytery, Bibiane, the old housekeeper, must have gone out to gossip with some of the neighbors.

The priest effected an entrance into the house, which had once been his, by forcing the lock of the door opening on the garden; he found the requisite articles, and retired without having been discovered.

That night the abbe hazarded a cruel but indispensable operation. His heart trembled, but not the hand that held the knife, although he had never before attempted so difficult a task.

"It is not upon my weak powers that I rely: I have placed my trust in One who is on High."

His faith was rewarded. Three days later the wounded man, after quite a comfortable night, seemed to regain consciousness.

His first glance was for his devoted wife, who was seated by his bedside; his first word was for his son.

"Maurice?" he asked.

"Is in safety," replied the abbe. "He must be on the way to Turin."

M. d'Escorval's lips moved as if he

were murmuring a prayer; then, in a feeble voice:

"We owe you a debt of gratitude which we can never pay," he murmured, "for I think I sh ll pull through."

He did "pull through," but not without terrible suffering, not without difficulties that made those around him tremble with anxiety. Jean Lacheneur, more fortunate, was on his feet by the end of the week.

Forty days had passed, when one evening—it was the seventeenth of April—while the abbe was reading a newspaper to the baron, the door gently opened and one of the Poignot boys put in his head, then quickly withdrew it.

The priest finished the paragraph, laid down the paper, and quietly went out.

"What is it?" he inquired of the young man.

"Ah! monsieur, M. Maurice, Mlle. Lacheneur and the old corporal have just arrived; they wish to come up."

In three bounds the abbe descended the narrow staircase.

"Unfortunate creatures!" he exclaimed, addressing the three imprudent travelers, "what has induced you to return here?"

Then turning to Maurice:

"Is it not enough that *for* you, and *through* you, your father has nearly died? Are you afraid he will not be recaptured, that you return here to set the enemies upon his track? Depart!"

The poor boy, quite overwhelmed, faltered his excuse. Uncertainty seemed to him worse than death; he had heard of M. Lacheneur's execution; he had not reflected, he would go at once; he asked only to see his father and to embrace his mother.

The priest was inflexible.

The slightest emotion might kill your father," he declared; "and to tell your mother of your return, and of the dangers to which you have foolishly exposed yourself, would cause her untold tortures. Go at once. Cross the frontier again this very night."

Jean Lacheneur, who had witnessed this scene, now approached.

"It is time for me to depart," said he, and I entreat you to care for my sister, the place for her is here, not upon the highways."

The abbe deliberated for a moment, then he said brusquely:

"So be it; but go at once; your name is not upon the proscribed list. You will not be pursued."

Thus, suddenly separated from his wife, Maurice wished to confer with her, to give her some parting advice; but the abbe did not al ow him an opportunity.

"Go, go at once," he insisted. "Farewell!"

The good abbe was too hasty.

Just when Maurice stood sorely in need of wise counsel, he was thus delivered over to the influence of Jean Lacheneur's furious hatred. As soon as they were outside:

"This," exclaimed Jean, "is the work of the Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu! I do not even know where they have thrown the body of my murdered parent; you cannot even embrace the father who has been traitorously assassinated by them!"

He laughed a harsh, discordant, terrible laugh, and continued.

"And yet, if we ascended that hill, we could see the Chateau de Sairmeuse in the distance, brightly illuminated. They are celebrating the marriage of Martial de Sairmeuse and Blanche de Courtornieu. *We* are homeless wanderers without friends, and without a shelter for our heads: *they* are feasting and making merry."

Less than this would have sufficed to rekindle the wrath of Maurice. He forgot everything in saying to himself that to disturb this *fete* by his appearance would be a vengeance worthy of him.

"I will go and challenge Martial now, on the instant, in the presence of the revellers," he exclaimed.

But Jean interrupted him.

"No, not that! They are cowards; they would arrest you. Write; I will be the bearer of the letter."

Corporal Bavois heard them; but he did not oppose their folly. He thought it all perfectly natural, under the circumstances, and esteemed them the more for their rashness.

Forgetful of prudence they entered the first shop, and the challenge was written and confided to Jean Lacheneur.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

To disturb the merry-making at the Chateau de Sairmeuse; to change the joy of the bridal-day into sadness; to cast a gloom over the nuptials of Martial and Mlle. Blanche de Courtornieu.

This, in truth, was all that Jean Lacheneur hoped to do.

As for believing that Martial, triumphant and happy, would accept the challenge of Maurice, a miserable outlaw, he did not believe it.

While awaiting Martial in the vestibule of the chateau, he armed himself against the scorn and sneers which he would probably receive from this haughty nobleman whom he had come to insult.

But Martial's kindly greeting had disconcerted him a little.

But he was reassured when he saw the

terrible effect produced upon the marquis by the insulting letter.

"We have cut him to the quick," he thought.

When Martial seized him by the arm and led him up-stairs, he made no resistance.

While they traversed the brightly lighted drawing-rooms and passed through the crowd of astonished guests, Jean thought neither of his heavy shoes nor of his peasant dress.

Breathless with anxiety, he wondered what was to come.

He soon knew.

Leaning against the gilded door-post, he witnessed the terrible scene in the little *salon*.

He saw Martial de Sairmeuse, frantic with passion, cast into the face of his father-in-law Maurice d'Escorval's letter.

One might have supposed that all this did not affect him in the least, he stood so cold and unmoved, with compressed lips and downcast eyes; but appearances were deceitful. His heart throbbed with wild exultation; and if he cast down his eyes, it was only to conceal the joy that sparkled there.

He had not hoped for so prompt and so terrible a revenge.

Nor was this all.

After brutally repulsing Blanche, his newly wedded wife, who attempted to detain him, Martial again seized Jean Lacheneur's arm.

"Now," said he, "follow me!"

Jean followed him still without a word.

They again crossed the grand hall, but instead of going to the vestibule Martial took a candle that was burning upon a side table, and opened a little door leading to the private staircase.

"Where are you taking me?" inquired Jean Lacheneur.

Martial, who had already ascended two or three steps, turned.

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

The other shrugged his shoulders, and coldly replied:

"If you put it in that way, let us go on."

They entered the room which Martial had occupied since taking possession of the chateau. It was the same room that had once belonged to Jean Lacheneur; and nothing had been changed. He recognized the brightly flowered curtains, the figures on the carpet, and even an old arm-chair where he had read many a novel in secret.

Martial hastened to a small writing-desk, and took from it a paper which he slipped into his pocket.

"Now," said he, "let us go. We must avoid another scene. My father and—my wife will be seeking me. I will explain when we are outside."

They hastily descended the staircase, passed through the gardens, and soon reached the long avenue.

Then Jean Lacheneur suddenly paused.

"To come so far for a simple yes or no is, I think unnecessary," said he. "Have you decided? What answer am I to give Maurice d'Escorval?"

"Nothing! You will take me to him. I must see him and speak with him in order to justify myself. Let us proceed!"

But Jean Lacheneur did not move.

"What you ask is impossible!" he replied.

"Why?"

"Because Maurice is pursued. If he is captured, he will be tried and undoubtedly condemned to death. He is now in a safe retreat, and I have no right to disclose it.

Maurice's safe retreat, was in fact, only a neighboring wood, where in company with the corporal, he was awaiting Jean's return.

But Jean could not resist the temptation to make this response, which was far more insulting than if he had simply said:

"We fear informers!"

Strange as it may appear to one who knew Martial's proud and violent nature, he did not resent the insult.

"So you distrust me!" he said, sadly.

Jean Lacheneur was silent—another insult.

"But," insisted Martial, "after what you have just seen and heard you can no longer suspect me of having cut the ropes which I carried to the baron."

"No! I am convinced that you are innocent of that atrocious act."

"You saw how I punished the man who dared to compromise the honor of the name of Sairmeuse. And this man is the father of the young girl whom I wedded to-day."

"I have seen all this; but I must still reply: 'Impossible.'"

Jean was amazed at the patience, we should rather say, the humble resignation displayed by Martial de Sairmeuse.

Instead of rebelling against this manifest injustice, Martial drew from his pocket the paper which he had just taken from his desk, and handing it to Jean:

"Those who have brought upon me the shame of having my word doubted shall be punished for it," he said grimly. "You do not believe in my sincerity, Jean. Here is a proof, which I expect you to give to Maurice, and which cannot fail to convince even you."

"What is this proof?"

"The letter written by my hand, in exchange for which my father assisted in the baron's escape. An inexplicable presentiment prevented me from burning this compromising letter. To-day, I

rejoice that such was the case. Take it, and use it as you will."

Any one save Jean Lacheneur would have been touched by the generosity of soul. But Jean was implacable. His was a nature which nothing can disarm, which nothing can mollify; hatred in his heart was a passion which, instead of growing weaker with time, increased and became more terrible.

He would have sacrificed anything at that moment for the ineffable joy of seeing this proud and detested marquis at his feet.

"Very well, I will give it to Maurice," he responded, coldly.

"It should be a bond of alliance, it seems to me," said Martial, gently.

Jean Lacheneur made a gesture terrible in its irony and menace.

"A bond of alliance!" he exclaimed. You are too fast, Monsieur le Marquis! Have you forgotten all the blood that flows between us? You did not cut the ropes; but who condemned the innocent Baron d'Escorval to death? Was it not the Duke de Sairmeuse? An alliance! You have forgotten that you and yours sent my father to the scaffold! How have you rewarded the man whose heroic honesty gave you back a fortune? By murdering him, and by ruining the reputation of his daughter."

"I offered my name and my fortune to your sister."

"I would have killed her with my own hand had she accepted your offer. Let this prove to you that I do not forget. If any great disgrace ever tarnishes the proud name of Sairmeuse, think of Jean Lacheneur. My hand will be in it."

He was so frantic with passion that he forgot his usual caution. By a violent effort he recovered his self-possession, and in calmer tones he added:

"And if you are so desirous of seeing Maurice, be at the Reche to-morrow at mid-day. He will be there."

Having said this, he turned abruptly aside, sprang over the fence skirting the avenue, and disappeared in the darkness.

"Jean," cried Martial, in almost supplicating tones; "Jean, come back—listen to me!"

No response.

A sort of bewilderment had seized the young marquis, and he stood motionless and dazed in the middle of the road.

A horse and rider on their way to Montaignac, that nearly ran over him, aroused him from his stupor and the consciousness of his acts, which he had lost while reading the letter from Maurice, came back to him.

Now he could judge of his conduct calmly.

Was it indeed he, Martial, the phlegmatic skeptic, the man who boasted of his indifference and his insensibility, who had thus forgotten all self-control?

Alas, yes. And when Blanche de Courtornieu, now and henceforth the Marquise de Sairmeuse, accused Marie-Anne of being the cause of his frenzy, she had not been entirely wrong.

Martial, who regarded the opinion of the entire world with disdain, was rendered frantic by the thought that Marie-Anne despised him, and considered him a traitor and a coward.

It was for her sake, that in his outburst of rage, he resolved upon such a startling justification. And if he besought Jean to lead him to Maurice d'Escorval, it was because he hoped to find Marie-Anne not far off, and to say to her:

"Appearances were against me, but I am innocent; and I have proved it by unmasking the real culprit."

It was to Marie-Anne that he wished this famous letter to be given, thinking that she, at least, could not fail to be surprised at his generosity.

His expectations had been disappointed; and now he realized what a terrible scandal he had created.

"It will be the devil to arrange!" he explained; "but nonsense! it will be forgotten in a month. The best way will be to face those gossips at once: I will return immediately."

He said: "I will return," in the most deliberate manner; but in proportion as he neared the chateau, his courage failed him.

The guests must have departed ere this, and Martial concluded that he would probably find himself alone with his young wife, his father, and the Marquis de Courtornieu. What reproaches, tears, anger and threats he would be obliged to encounter.

"No," he muttered. "I am not such a fool! Let them have a night to calm themselves. I will not appear until to-morrow."

But where should he pass the night? He was in evening dress and bare-headed; he began to feel cold. The house belonging to the duke in Montaignac would afford him a refuge.

"I shall find a bed, some servants, a fire, and a change of clothing there—and to-morrow, a horse to return."

It was quite a distance to walk; but in his present mood this did not displease him.

The servant who came to open the door when he rapped, was speechless with astonishment on recognizing him.

"You, monsieur!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, it is I. Light a good fire in the drawing-room for me, and bring me a change of clothing."

The valet obeyed, and soon Martial found himself alone, stretched upon a sofa before the cheerful blaze.

It would be a good thing to sleep and

forget my troubles," he said to himself.

He tried; but it was not until early morning that he fell into a feverish slumber.

He awoke about nine o'clock, ordered breakfast, concluded to return to Sairmeuse, and he was eating with a good appetite, when suddenly:

"Have a horse saddled instantly," he exclaimed.

He had just remembered the rendezvous with Maurice. Why should he not go there?

He set out at once, and thanks to a spirited horse, he reached the Reche at half-past eleven o'clock.

The others had not yet arrived; he fastened his horse to a tree near by, and leisurely climbed to the summit of the hill.

This spot had been the site of Lacheneur's house. The four walls remained standing, blackened by fire.

Martial was contemplating the ruins, not without deep emotion, when he heard a sharp crackling in the underbrush.

He turned; Maurice, Jean, and Corporal Bavois were approaching.

The old soldier carried under his arm a long and narrow package, enveloped in a piece of green serge. It contained the swords which Jean Lacheneur had gone to Montaignac during the night to procure from a retired officer.

"We are sorry to have kept you waiting," began Maurice, "but you will observe that it is not yet mid-day. Since we scarcely expected to see you——"

"I was too anxious to justify myself not to be here early," interrupted Martial.

Maurice shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"It is not a question of self-justification, but of fighting," he said, in a tone rude even to insolence.

Insulting as were the words and the gesture that accompanied them, Martial never so much as winced.

"Sorrow has rendered you unjust," said he, gently, "or M. Lacheneur here has told you nothing."

"Jean has told me all."

"Well, then?"

Martial's coolness drove Maurice frantic.

"Well," he replied, with extreme violence, "my hatred is unabated even if my scorn is diminished. You have owed me an opportunity to avenge myself, monsieur, ever since the day we met on the square at Sairmeuse in the presence of Mlle. Lacheneur. You said to me on that occasion: 'We shall meet again.' Here we stand now face to face. What insults must I heap upon you to decide you to fight?"

A flood of crimson dyed Martial's face. He seized one of the swords which Bavois offered him, and assumed an attitude of defence.

"You will have it so," said he in a husky voice. "The thought of Marie-Anne can no longer save you."

But the blades had scarcely crossed before a cry from Jean and from Corporal Bavois arrested the combat.

"The soldiers!" they exclaimed; "let us fly!"

A dozen soldiers were indeed approaching at the top of their speed.

"Ah! I spoke the truth!" exclaimed Maurice. "The coward came, but the gendarmes accompanied him."

He bounded back, and breaking his sword over his knee, he hurled the fragments in Martial's face, saying:

"Here, miserable wretch!"

"Wretch!" repeated Jean and Corporal Bavois, "traitor! coward!"

And, they fled, leaving Martial thunderstruck.

He struggled hard to regain his composure. The soldiers were very near; he ran to meet them, and addressing the officer in command, he said imperiously:

"Do you know who I am?"

'Yes," replied the sergeant, respectfully, "you are the son of the Duke de Sairmeuse."

"Very well! I forbid you to follow those men."

The sergeant hesitated at first; then, in a decided tone, he replied:

"I cannot obey you, sir. I have my orders."

And addressing his men:

"Forward!" he exclaimed. He was about to set the example, when Martial seized him by the arm.

"At least you will not refuse to tell me who sent you here?"

"Who sent us? The colonel, of course, in obedience to orders from the *grand prevot*, M. de Courtornieu. He sent the order last night. We have been hidden in that grove since daybreak. But release me—*tonnerre!* would you have my expedition fail entirely?"

He hurried away, and Martial, staggering like a drunken man, descended the slope, and remounted his horse.

But he did not repair to the Chateau De Sairmeuse; he returned to Montaignac, and passed the remainder of the afternoon in the solitude of his own room.

That evening he sent two letters to Sairmeuse. One to his father, the other to h s wife.

CHAPTER LXXXII.

TERRIBLE as Martial imagined the scandal to be which he had created, his

conception of it by no means equalled the reality.

Had a thunderbolt burst beneath that roof, the guests at Sairmeuse could not have been more amazed and horrified.

A shudder passed over the assembly when Martial, terrible in his passion, flung the crumbled letter full in the face of the Marquis de Courtornieu.

And when the marquis sank half-fainting into an arm-chair, some young ladies of extreme sensibility could not repress a cry of fear.

For twenty seconds after Martial disappeared with Jean Lacheneur, the guests stood as motionless as statues, pale, mute, stupefied.

It was Blanche who broke the spell.

While the Marquis de Courtornieu was panting for breath—while the Duke de Sairmeuse was trembling and speechless with suppressed anger, the young marquise made an heroic attempt to come to the rescue.

With her hand still aching from Martial's brutal clasp, a heart swelling with rage and hatred, and a face whiter than her bridal veil, she had strength to restrain her tears and to compel her lips to smile.

"Really this is placing too much importance on a trifling misunderstanding which will be explained to-morrow," she said, almost gayly, to those nearest her.

And stepping into the middle of the hall she made a sign to the musicians to play a country-dance.

But when the first measures floated through the air, the company, as if by unanimous consent, hastened towards the door.

One might have supposed the chateau on fire—the guests did not withdraw, they actually fled.

An hour before, the Marquis de Courtornieu and the Duke de Sairmeuse had been overwhelmed with the most obsequious homage and adulation.

But now there was not one in that assembly daring enough to take them openly by the hand.

Just when they believed themselves all-powerful they were rudely precipitated from their lordly eminence. Disgrace and perhaps punishment were to be their portion.

Heroic to the last, the bride endeavored to stay the tide of retreating guests.

Stationing herself near the door, with her most bewitching smile upon her lips, Madame Blanche spared neither flattering words nor entreaties in her efforts to reassure the deserters.

Vain attempt! Useless sacrifice! Many ladies were not sorry of an opportunity to repay the young Marquise de Sairmeuse for the disdain and the caustic words of Blanche de Courtornieu.

Soon all the guests, who had so eagerly presented themselves that morning, had disappeared, and there remained only one old gentleman who, on account of his gout, had deemed it prudent not to mingle with the crowd.

He bowed in passing before the young marquise, and blushing at this insult to a woman, he departed as the others had done.

Blanche was now alone. There was no longer any necessity for constraint. There were no more curious witnesses to enjoy her sufferings and to make comment upon them. With a furious gesture she tore her bridal veil and the wreath of orange flowers from her head, and trampled them under foot.

A servant was passing through the hall; she stopped him.

"Extinguish the lights everywhere!" she ordered, with an angry stamp of her foot as if she had been in her own father's house, and not at Sairmeuse.

He obeyed her, and then, with flashing eyes and dishevelled hair, she hastened to the little *salon* in which the denouement had taken place.

A crowd of servants surrounded the marquis, who was lying like one stricken with apoplexy.

"All the blood in his body has flown to his head," remarked the duke, with a shrug of his shoulders.

For the duke was furious with his former friends.

He scarcely knew with whom he was most angry, Martial or the Marquis de Courtornieu.

Martial, by this public confession, had certainly imperilled, if he had not ruined, their political future.

But, on the other hand, had not the Marquis de Courtornieu represented a Sairmeuse as being guilty of an act of treason revolting to any honorable heart?

Buried in a large arm-chair, he sat watching, with contracted brows, the movements of the servants, when his daughter-in-law entered the room.

She paused before him, and with arms folded tightly across her breast, she said, angrily:

"Why did you remain here while I was left alone to endure such humiliation. Ah! had I been a man! All our guests have fled, monsieur—all!"

M. de Sairmeuse sprang up.

"Ah, well! what if they have. Let them go to the devil!"

Of the guests that had just left his house there was not one whom the duke really regretted—not one whom he regarded as an equal. In giving a marriage feast for his son, he had bidden all the gentry of the neighborhood. They had come—very well! They had fled—*bon voyage!*

If the duke cared at all for their desertion, it was only because it presaged

with terrible eloquence the disgrace that was to come.

Still he tried to deceive himself.

"They will return, madame; you will see them return, humble and repentant! But where can Martial be?"

The lady's eyes flashed, but she made no reply.

"Did he go away with the son of that rascal, Lacheneur?"

"I believe so."

"It will not be long before he returns——"

"Who can say?"

M. de Sairmeuse struck the marble mantel heavily with his clenched fist.

"My God!" he exclaimed, "this is an overwhelming misfortune."

The young wife believed that he was anxious and angry on her account. But she was mistaken. He was thinking only of his disappointed ambition.

Whatever he might pretend, the duke secretly confessed his son's superiority and his genius for intrigue, and he was now extremely anxious to consult him.

"He has wrought this evil; it is for him to repair it! And he is capable of it if he chooses," he murmured.

Then, aloud, he resumed:

"Martial must be found—he must be found——"

With an angry gesture, Blanche interrupted him.

"You must seek Marie-Anne if you wish to find—my husband."

The duke was of the same opinion, but he dared not avow it.

"Anger leads you astray, marquise," said he.

"I know what I know."

"Martial will soon make his appearance, believe me. If he went away, he will soon return. They shall go for him at once, or I will go for him myself——"

He left the room with a muttered oath, and Blanche approached her father, who still seemed to be unconscious.

She seized his arm and shook it roughly, saying in the most peremptory tone:

"Father! father!"

This voice, which had so often made the Marquis de Courtornieu tremble, was far more efficacious than eau de Cologne. He opened one eye the least bit in the world, then quickly closed it, but not so quickly that his daughter failed to discover it.

"I wish to speak with you," she said: "get up."

He dared not disobey, and slowly and with difficulty, he raised himself.

"Ah! how I suffer!" he groaned, "how I suffer!"

His daughter glanced at him scornfully; then, in a tone of bitter irony, she remarked:

"Do you think I am in Paradise?"

"Speak," sighed the marquis. "What do you wish to say!"

The bride turned haughtily to the servants.

"Leave the room!" she said imperiously.

They obeyed, and, after she had locked the door:

"Let us speak of Martial," she began.

At the sound of this name, the marquis bounded from his chair with clenched fists.

"Ah the wretch!" he exclaimed.

"Martial is my husband, father."

"And you!—after what he has done—you dare to defend him?"

"I do not defend him; but I do not wish him to be murdered."

At that moment the news of Martial's death would have given the Marquis de Courtornieu infinite satisfaction.

"You heard, father," continued Blanche, "the rendezvous appointed tomorrow, at mid-day, on the Reche. I know Martial; he has been insulted, and he will go there. Will he encounter a loyal adversary? No. He will find a crowd of assassins. You alone can prevent him from being assassinated."

"I—and how?"

"By sending some soldiers to the Reche, with orders to conceal themselves in the grove—with orders to arrest these murderers at the proper moment."

The marquis gravely shook his head.

"If I do that," said he, "Martial is quite capable——"

"Of anything!—yes, I know it. But what does it matter to you, since I am willing to assume the responsibility?"

M. de Courtornieu vainly tried to penetrate the bride's real motive.

"The order to Montaignac must be sent at once," she insisted.

Had she been less excited she would have discerned the gleam of malice in her father's eye. He was thinking that this would afford him an ample revenge, since he could bring dishonor upon Martial, who had shown so little regard for the honor of others.

"Very well; since you will have it so, he said, with feigned reluctance.

His daughter made haste to bring him ink and pens, and with trembling hands he prepared a series of minute instructions for the commander at Montaignac.

Blanche herself gave the letter to a servant, with directions to depart at once; and it was not until she had seen him set off on a gallop that she went to her own apartments—the apartments in which Martial had gathered together all that was most beautiful and luxurious.

But this splendor only aggravated the misery of the deserted wife, for that she was deserted she did not doubt for a moment. She was sure that her husband would not return; she did not expect him.

The Duke de Sairmeuse was searching the neighborhood with a party of servants, but she knew that it was labor lost; that they would not encounter Martial.

Where could he be? Near Marie-Anne most assuredly—and at the thought a wild desire to wreak her vengeance on her rival took possession of her heart.

Martial, at Montaignac, had ended by going to sleep.

Blanche, when daylight came, exchanged the snowy bridal robes for a black dress, and wandered about the garden like a restless spirit.

She spent most of the day shut up in her room, refusing to allow the duke, or even her father, to enter.

In the evening, about eight o'clock, they received tidings from Martial.

A servant brought two letters; one, sent by Martial to his father, the other, to his wife.

For a moment or more Blanche hesitated to open the one intended for her. It would determine her destiny; she was afraid.

At last she broke the seal and read:

"MADAME LA MARQUISE—Between you and me all is ended; reconciliation is impossible.

"From this moment you are free. I esteem you enough to hope that you will respect the name of Sairmeuse, from which I cannot relieve you.

"You will agree with me, I am sure, in thinking a quiet separation preferable to the scandal of a divorce suit.

"My lawyer will pay you an allowance befitting the wife of a man whose income amounts to three hundred thousand francs.

"MARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE."

Blanche staggered beneath this terrible blow. She was indeed deserted—and deserted, as she supposed, for another.

"Ah!" she exclaimed "that creature! that creature! I will kill her!"

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

THE twenty-four hours which Blanche had spent in measuring the extent of her terrible misfortune, the duke had spent in raving and swearing.

He had not even thought of going to bed.

After his fruitless search for his son he returned to the chateau, and began a continuous tramp to and fro in the great hall.

He was almost sinking from weariness when his son's letter was handed him.

It was very brief.

Martial did not vouchsafe any explanation; he did not even mention the rupture between his wife and himself.

"I cannot return to Sairmeuse," he wrote, "and yet it is of the utmost importance that I should see you.

"You will, I trust, approve my determinations when I explain the reasons that have guided me in making them.

"Come to Montaignac, then, the sooner the better. I am waiting for you."

Had he listened to the prompting of his impatience, the duke would have started at once. But how could he thus abandon the Marquis de Courtornieu, who had accepted his hospitality, and especially Blanche, his son's wife?

He must, at least, see them, speak to them, and warn them of his intended departure.

He attempted this in vain. Madame Blanche had shut herself up in her own apartments, and remained deaf to all entreaties for admittance. Her father had been put to bed, and the physician who had been summoned to attend him, declared the marquis to be at death's door.

The duke was therefore obliged to resign himself to the prospect of another night of suspense, which was almost intolerable to a character like his.

"To-morrow, after breakfast, I will find some pretext to escape, without telling them I am going to see Martial," he thought.

He was spared this trouble. The next morning, at about nine o'clock, while he was dressing, a servant came to inform him that M. de Courtornieu and his daughter were awaiting him in the drawing-room.

Much surprised, he hastened down.

When he entered the room, the marquis, who was seated in an arm-chair, rose, leaning heavily upon the shoulder of Aunt Medea.

Madame Blanche came rapidly forward to meet the duke, as pale as if every drop of blood had been drawn from her veins.

"We are going, Monsieur le Duc," she said, coldly, "and we wish to make our adieux."

"What! you are going? Will you not ——"

The young bride interrupted him by a sad gesture, and drawing Martial's letter from her bosom, she handed it to M. de Sairmeuse, saying:

"Will you do me the favor to peruse this, monsieur?"

The duke glanced over the short epistle, and his astonishment was so intense that he could not even find an oath.

"Incomprehensible!" he faltered; "incomprehensible!"

"Incomprehensible, indeed," repeated the young wife sadly, but without bitterness. "I was married yesterday; to-day I am deserted. It would have been generous to have reflected the evening be-

fore and not the next day. Tell Martial, however, that I forgive him for having destroyed my life, for having made me the most miserable of creatures. I also forgive him for the supreme insult of speaking to me of his fortune. I trust he may be happy. Adieu, Monsieur le Duc, we shall never meet again. Adieu!"

She took her father's arm, and they were about to retire, when M. de Sairmeuse hastily threw himself between them and the door.

"You shall not depart thus!" he exclaimed. "I will not suffer it. Wait, at least, until I have seen Martial. Perhaps he is not as culpable as you suppose——"

"Enough!" interrupted the marquis; "enough! This is one of those outrages which can never be repaired. May your conscience forgive you, as I, myself, forgive you. Farewell!"

This was said so perfectly, with such entire harmony of intonation and gesture, that M. de Sairmeuse was bewildered.

With an absolutely wonderstruck air he watched the marquis and his daughter depart, and they had been gone some moments before he recovered himself sufficiently to exclaim:

"Old hypocrite! does he believe me his dupe?"

His dupe! M. de Sairmeuse was so far from being his dupe, that his next thought was:

"What is to follow this farce? He says that he pardons us—that means that he has some crushing blow in store for us."

This conviction filled him with disquietude. He really felt unable to cope successfully with the perfidious marquis.

"But Martial is a match for him!" he exclaimed. "Yes, I must see Martial at once."

So great was his anxiety that he lent a helping hand in harnessing the horses he had ordered, and when the carriage was ready, he announced his determination to drive himself.

"As he urged the horses furiously on he tried to reflect, but the most contradictory ideas seethed in his brain, and he lost all power to consider the situation calmly.

He burst into Martial's room like a tornado.

"I think you must certainly have gone mad, marquis," he exclaimed. "That is the only valid excuse you can offer."

But Martial, who had been expecting this visit, had prepared himself for it.

"Never, on the contrary, have I felt more calm and composed in mind," he replied. "Allow me to ask you one question. Was it you who sent the soldiers to the rendezvous which Maurice d'Escorval had appointed?"

"Marquis!"

"Very well! Then it was another act of infamy on the part of the Marquis de Courtornieu."

The duke made no reply. In spite of his faults and his vices, this haughty man possessed the characteristic of the old French nobility—fidelity to his word and undoubted valor.

He thought it perfectly natural, even necessary, that Martial should fight with Maurice; and he thought it a contemptible act to send armed soldiers to seize an honest and confiding opponent.

"This is the second time," pursued Martial, "that this scoundrel has attempted to bring dishonor upon our name; and if I desire to convince people of the truth of this assertion, I must break off all connection with him and his daughter. I have done this. I do not regret it, since I married her only out of deference to your wishes, and because it seemed necessary for me to marry, and because all women, save one who can never be mine, are alike to me."

Such utterances were not at all calculated to reassure the duke.

"This sentiment is very noble, no doubt," said he; "but it has none the less ruined the political prospects of our house."

An almost imperceptible smile curved Martial's lips.

"I believe, on the contrary, that I have saved them," he replied.

"It is useless for us to attempt to deceive ourselves; this whole affair of the insurrection has been abominable, and you have good reason to bless the opportunity of freeing yourself from the responsibility of it which this quarrel gives you. With a little address, you can throw all the odium upon the Marquis de Courtornieu, and keep for yourself only the prestige of valuable service rendered."

The duke's face brightened.

"Zounds, marquis!" he exclaimed; "that is a good idea! In the future I shall be infinitely less afraid of Courtornieu.

Martial remained thoughtful.

"It is not the Marquis de Courtornieu whom I fear," he murmured, "but his daughter—my wife."

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

ONE must have lived in the country to know with what inconceivable rapidity news flies from mouth to mouth,

Strange as it may seem, the news of the scene at the chateau reached Father Poignot's farm-house that same evening.

It had not been three hours since

Maurice, Jean Lacheneur and Bavois left the house, promising to recross the frontier that same night.

Abbe Midon had decided to say nothing to M. d'Escorval of his son's return, and to conceal Marie-Anne's presence in the house. The baron's condition was so critical that the merest trifle might turn the scale.

About ten o'clock the baron fell asleep, and the abbe and Madame d'Escorval went down stairs to talk with Marie-Anne. As they were sitting there Poignot's eldest son entered in a state of great excitement.

After supper he had gone with some of his acquaintances to admire the splendors of the *fete*, and he now came rushing back to relate the strange events of the evening to his father's guests.

"It is inconceivable!" murmured the abbe.

He knew but too well, and the others comprehended it likewise, that these strange events rendered their situation more perilous than ever.

"I cannot understand how Maurice could commit such an act of folly after what I had just said to him. The baron's most cruel enemy has been his own son. We must wait until to-morrow before deciding upon anything."

The next day they heard of the meeting at the Reche. A peasant who, from a distance, had witnessed the preliminaries of the duel which had not been fought, was able to give them the fullest details.

He had seen the two adversaries take their places, then the soldiers run to the spot, and afterwards pursue Maurice, Jean and Bavois.

But he was sure that the soldiers had not overtaken them. He had met them five hours afterwards, harrassed and furious; and the officer in charge of the expedition declared their failure to be the fault of the Marquis de Sairmeuse, who had detained them.

That same day Father Poignot informed the abbe that the Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu were at variance. It was the talk of the country. The marquis had returned to his chateau, accompanied by his daughter, and the duke had gone to Montaignac.

The abbe's anxiety on receiving this intelligence was so poignant that he could not conceal it from Baron d'Escorval.

"You have heard something, my friend," said the baron.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing."

"Some new danger threatens us."

"None. I swear it."

The priest's protestations did not convince the baron.

"Oh, do not deny it!" he exclaimed. Night before last, when you entered my room after I awoke, you were paler than death, and my wife had certainly been crying. What does all this mean?"

Usually, when the cure did not wish to reply to the sick man's questions, it was sufficient to tell him that conversation and excitement would retard his recovery; but this time the baron was not so docile.

"It will be very easy for you to restore my tranquillity," he said. "Confess now, that you are trembling lest they discover my retreat. This fear is torturing me also. Very well, swear to me that you will not allow them to take me alive, and then my mind will be at rest."

"I cannot take such an oath as that," said the cure, turning pale.

"And why?" insisted M. d'Escorval. "If I am recaptured, what will happen? They will nurse me, and then, as soon as I can stand upon my feet, they will shoot me down. Would it be a crime to save me from such suffering? You are my best friend; swear to render me this supreme service. Would you have me curse you for saving my life?"

The abbe made no response; but his eye, voluntarily or involuntarily, turned with a peculiar expression to the box of medicine standing upon the table near by.

Did he wish to be understood as saying:

"I will do nothing; but you will find a poison there."

M. d'Escorval understood it in this way, for it was with an accent of gratitude that he murmured:

"Thanks!"

Now that he felt that he was master of his life he breathed more freely. From that moment his condition, so long desperate, began to improve.

"I can defy all my enemies from this hour," he said, with a gayety which certainly was not feigned.

Day after day passed and the abbe's sinister apprehensions were not realized; he, too, began to regain confidence.

Instead of causing an increase of severity, Maurice's and Jean Lacheneur's frightful imprudence had been, as it were, the point of departure for a universal indulgence.

One might reasonably have supposed that the authorities of Montaignac had forgotten, and desired to have forgotten, if that were possible, Lacheneur's conspiracy, and the abominable slaughter for which it had been made the pretext.

They soon heard at the farm that Maurice and the brave corporal had succeeded in reaching Piedmont.

No allusion was made to Jean Lacheneur, so it was supposed that he had not left the country; but they had no reason to fear for his safety, since he was not upon the proscribed list.

Later, it was rumored that the Marquis de Courtornieu was ill, and that Mme.

Blanche did not leave his bedside.

Soon afterward, Father Poignot, on returning from Montaignac, reported that the duke had just passed a week in Paris, and that he was now on his way home with one more decoration—another proof of royal favor—and that he had succeeded in obtaining an order for the release of all the conspirators, who were now in prison.

It was impossible to doubt this intelligence, for the Montaignac papers mentioned this fact, with all the circumstances on the following day.

The abbe attributed this sudden and happy change entirely to the rupture between the duke and the marquis, and this was the universal opinion in the neighborhood. Even the retired officers remarked:

"The duke is decidedly better than he is supposed to be, and if he has been severe, it is only because he was influenced by that odious Marquis de Courtornieu."

Marie-Anne alone suspected the truth. A secret presentiment told her that it was Martial de Sairmeuse who had shaken off his wonted apathy, and was working these changes and using and abusing his ascendancy over the mind of his father.

"And it is for your sake," whispered an inward voice, "that Martial is thus working." What does this careless egotist care for these obscure peasants, whose names he does not even know? If he protects them, it is only that he may have a right to protect you, and those whom you love!"

With these thoughts in her mind she could not but feel her aversion to Martial diminish.

Was not such conduct truly heroic in a man whose dazzling offers she had refused? Was there not real moral grandeur in the feeling that induced Martial to reveal a secret which might ruin the political fortunes of his house, rather than be suspected of an unworthy action? And still the thought of this *grande passion* which she had inspired in so truly great a man never once made her heart quicken its throbbing.

Alas! nothing was capable of touching her heart now; nothing seemed to reach her through the gloomy sadness that enveloped her.

She was but the ghost of the formerly beautiful and radiant Marie-Anne. Her quick, alert tread had become slow and dragging, often she sat for whole days motionless in her chair, her eyes fixed upon vacancy, her lips contracted as if by a spasm, while great tears rolled silently down her cheeks.

Abbe Midon, who was greatly disquieted on her account, often attempted to question her.

"You are suffering, my child," he said kindly. "What is the matter?"

"I am not ill, monsieur."

"Why do you not confide in me? Am I not your friend? What do you fear?"

She shook her head sadly and replied:

"I have nothing to confide,"

She said this, and yet she was dying of sorrow and anguish.

Faithful to the promise she had made Maurice, she had said nothing of her condition, or of the marriage solemnized in the little church at Vigano. And she saw with inexpressible terror, the approach of the moment when she could no longer keep her secret. Her agony was frightful; but what could she do!

Fly? but where should she go? And by going, would she not lose all chance of hearing from Maurice, which was the only hope that sustained her in this trying hour?

She had almost determined on flight when circumstances—providentally, it seemed to her—came to her aid.

Money was needed at the farm. The guests were unable to obtain any without betraying their whereabouts, and Father Poignot's little store was almost exhausted.

Abbe Midon was wondering what they were to do, when Marie-Anne told him of the will which Chanlouineau had made in her favor, and of the money concealed beneath the hearth-stone in the best chamber.

"I might go to the Borderie at night," suggested Marie-Anne, "enter the house, which is unoccupied, obtain the money and bring it here. I have a right to do so, have I not?"

But the priest did not approve this step.

"You might be seen," said he, "and who knows—perhaps arrested. If you were questioned, what plausible explanation could you give?"

"What shall I do, then!"

"Act openly; you are not compromised. Make your appearance in Sairmeuse to-morrow as if you had just returned from Piedmont; go to the notary, take possession of your property, and install yourself at the Borderie."

Marie-Anne shuddered.

"Live in Chanlouineau's house," she faltered. "I alone!"

"Heaven will protect you, my dear child. I can see only advantages in your installation at the Borderie. It will be easy to communicate with you; and with ordinary precautions there can be no danger. Before your departure we will decide upon a place of rendezvous, and two or three times a week you can meet Father Poignot there. And, in the course of two or three months you can be still more useful to us. When people

have become accustomed to your residence at the Borderie, we will take the baron there. His convalescence will be much more rapid there, than here in this cramped and narrow loft, where we are obliged to conceal him now, and where he is really suffering for light and air."

So it was decided that Father Poignot should accompany Marie-Anne to the frontier that very night; there she would take the diligence that ran between Piedmont and Montaignac, passing through the village of Sairmeuse.

It was with the greatest care that the abbe dictated to Marie-Anne the story she was to tell of her sojourn in foreign lands. All that she said, and all her answers to questions must tend to prove that Baron d'Escorval was concealed near Turin.

The plan was carried out in every particular; and the next day, about eight o'clock, the people of Sairmeuse were greatly astonished to see Marie-Anne alight from the diligence.

"M. Lacheneur's daughter has returned!"

The words flew from lip to lip with marvelous rapidity, and soon all the inhabitants of the village were gathered at the doors and windows.

They saw the poor girl pay the driver, and enter the inn, followed by a boy bearing a small trunk.

In the city, curiosity has some shame; it hides itself while it spies into the affairs of its neighbors; but in the country it has no such scruples.

When Marie-Anne emerged from the inn, she found a crowd awaiting her with open mouths and staring eyes.

And more than twenty people making all sorts of comments, followed her to the door of the notary.

He was a man of importance, this notary, and he welcomed Marie-Anne with all the deference due an heiress of an unencumbered property, worth from forty to fifty thousand francs.

But jealous of his renown for perspicuity, he gave her clearly to understand that he, being a man of experience, had divined that love alone had dictated Chanlouineau's last will and testament.

Marie-Anne's composure and resignation made him really angry.

"You forget what brings me here," she said; "you do not tell me what I have to do!"

The notary, thus interrupted, made no further attempts at consolation.

"*Peste!*" he thought, "she is in a hurry to get possession of her property—the avaricious creature!"

Then aloud:

"The business can be terminated at once, for the justice of the peace is at liberty to-day, and he can go with us to break the seals this afternoon."

So, before evening, all the legal requirements were complied with, and Marie-Anne was formally installed at the Borderie.

She was alone in Chanlouineau's house—alone! Night came on and a great terror seized her heart. It seemed to her that the doors were about to open, that this man who had loved her so much would appear before her, and that she would hear his voice as she heard it for the last time in his grim prison cell.

She fought against these foolish fears, lit a lamp, and went through this house—now hers—in which everything spoke so forcibly of its former owner.

Slowly she examined the different rooms on the lower floor, noting the recent repairs which had been made and the conveniences which had been added, and at last she ascended to that room above which Chanlouineau had made the tabernacle of his passion.

Here, everything was magnificent, far more so than his words had led her to suppose. The poor peasant who made his breakfast off a crust and a bit of onion had lavished a small fortune on the decorations of this apartment, designed as a sanctuary for his idol.

"How he loved me!" murmured Marie-Anne, moved by that emotion, the bare thought of which had awakened the jealousy of Maurice.

But she had neither the time nor the right to yield to her feelings. Father Poignot was doubtless, even then, awaiting her at the rendezvous.

She lifted the hearth-stone, and found the sum of money which Chanlouineau had named.

The next morning, when he woke, the abbe received the money.

Now, Marie-Anne could breathe freely; and this peace, after so many trials and agitations, seemed to her almost happiness.

Faithful to the abbe's instructions, she lived alone; but, by frequent visits, she accustomed the people of the neighborhood to her presence.

Yes, she would have been almost happy, could she have had news of Maurice. What had become of him! Why did he give no sign of life? What would she not have given in exchange for some word of counsel and of love from him?

The time was fast approaching when she would require a confidant; and there was no one in whom she could confide.

In this hour of extremity, when she really felt that her reason was failing her, she remembered the old physician at Vigano, who had been one of the witnesses to her marriage.

"He would help me if I called upon him for aid," she thought.

She had no time to temporize or to reflect; she wrote to him immediately, giv-

ing the letter in charge of a youth in the neighborhood.

"The gentleman says you may rely upon him," said the messenger on his return.

That very evening Marie-Anne heard some one tap at her door. It was the kind-hearted old man who had come to her relief.

He remained at the Borderie nearly a fortnight.

When he departed one morning, before daybreak, he took away with him under his large cloak an infant—a boy—whom he had sworn to cherish as his own child.

CHAPTER LXXX

To quit Sairmeuse without any display of violence had cost Blanche an almost superhuman effort.

The wildest anger convulsed her soul at the very moment, when, with an assumption of melancholy dignity, she murmured those words of forgiveness.

Ah! had she obeyed the dictates of her resentment!

But her indomitable vanity aroused within her the heroism of a gladiator dying on the arena, with a smile upon his lips.

Falling, she intended to fall gracefully.

"No one shall see me weep; no one shall hear me complain," she said to her despondent father; "try to imitate me."

And on her return to the Chateau de Courtornieu, she was a stoic.

Her face, although pale, was as immobile as marble, beneath the curious gaze of the servants.

"I am to be called mademoiselle as in the past," she said, imperiously. "Any one forgetting this order will be dismissed."

A maid forgot that very day, and uttered the prohibited word, "madame." The poor girl was instantly dismissed, in spite of her tears and protestations.

All the servants were indignant.

"Does she hope to make us forget that she is married and that her husband has deserted her?" they queried.

Alas! she wished to forget it herself. She wished to annihilate all recollection of that fatal day whose sun had seen her a maiden, a wife, and a widow.

For was she not really a widow?

Only it was not death which had deprived her of her husband, but an odious rival—an infamous and perfidious creature lost to all sense of shame.

And yet, though she had been disdained, abandoned, and repulsed, she was no longer free.

She belonged to the man whose name she bore like a badge of servitude—to the man who hated her, who fled from her.

She was not yet twenty; and this was the end of her youth, of her life, of her hopes, and even of her dreams.

Society condemned her to solitude, while Martial was free to rove whereso-ever fancy might lead him.

Now she saw the disadvantage of isolating one's self. She had not been without friends in her school-girl days; but after leaving the convent she had alienated them by her haughtiness, on finding them not as high in rank, nor as rich as herself. She was now reduced to the irritating consolations of Aunt Medea, who was a worthy person, undoubtedly, but her tears flowed quite as freely for the loss of a cat, as for the death of a relative.

But Blanche bravely resolved that she would conceal her grief and despair in the recesses of her own heart.

She drove about the country; she wore the prettiest dresses in her *trousseau;* she forced herself to appear gay and indifferent.

But on going to attend high mass in Sairmeuse the following Sunday, she realized the futility of her efforts.

People did not look at her haughtily, or even curiously; but they turned away their heads to laugh, and she overheard remarks upon the maiden widow which pierced her very soul.

They mocked her; they ridiculed her!

"Oh! I will have my revenge!" she muttered.

But she had not waited for these insults before thinking of vengeance; and she had found her father quite ready to assist her in her plans.

For the first time the father and the daughter were in accord.

"The Duke de Sairmeuse shall learn what it costs to aid in the escape of a prisoner and to insult a man like me. Fortune, favor, position—he shall lose all! I hope to see him ruined and dishonored at my feet. You shall see that day! you shall see that day!" said the marquis, vehemently.

But, unfortunately for him and his plans, he was extremely ill for three days, after the scene at Sairmeuse; then he wasted three days more in composing a report, which was intended to crush his former ally.

This delay ruined him, since it gave Martial time to perfect his plans and to send the Duke de Sairmeuse to Paris skillfully indoctrinated.

And what did the duke say to the king, who accorded him such a gracious reception?

He undoubtedly pronounced the first reports false, reduced the Montaignac revolution to its proper proportions, represented Lacheneur as a fool, and his followers as inoffensive idiots.

Perhaps he led the king to suppose that the Marquis de Courtornieu might have

provoked the outbreak by undue severity. He had served under Napoleon, and possibly had thought it necessary to make a display of his zeal. There have been such cases.

So far as he himself was concerned, he deeply deplored the mistakes into which he had been led by the ambitious marquis, upon whom he cast most of the responsibility for the blood which had been shed.

The result of all this was, that when the Marquis de Courtornieu's report reached Paris, it was answered by a decree depriving him of the office of *grand prevot*.

This unexpected blow crushed him.

To think that a man as shrewd, as subtle-minded, as quick-witted, and adroit as himself—a man who had passed through so many troubled epoc . who had served with the same obsequious countenance all the masters who would accept his services—to think that such a man should have been thus duped and betrayed!

"It must be that old imbecile, the Duke de Sairmeuse, who has manœuvred so skillfully, and with so much a dress," he said. "But who advised him? I cannot imagine who it could have been."

Who it was Madame Blanche knew only too well.

She recognized Martial's hand in all this, as Marie-Anne had done.

"Ah! I was not deceived in him," she thought; "he is the great diplomatist I believed him to be. At his age to outwit my father, an old politician of such experience and acknowledged astuteness! And he does all this to please Marie-Anne," she continued, frantic with rage. "It is the first step towards obtaining pardon for the friends of that vile creature. She has unbounded influence over him, and so long as she lives there is no hope for me. But, patience."

She was patient, realizing that he who wishes to surely attain his revenge must wait, dissimulate, *prepare* an opportunity, but not force it.

What her revenge should be she had not yet decided; but she already had her eye upon a man whom she believed would be a willing instrument in her hands, and capable of doing anything for money.

But how had such a man chanced to cross the path of Madame Blanche? How did it happen that she was cognizant of the existence of such a person?

It was the result of one of those simple combinations of circumstances which go by the name of chance.

Burdened with remorse, despised and jeered at, and stoned whenever he showed himself upon the street, and horror-stricken whenever he thought of the terrible threats of Balstain, the Piedmontese inn-keeper, Chupin left Montaignac and came to beg an asylum in the Chateau de Sairmeuse.

In his ignorance, he thought that the *grand seigneur* who had employed him, and who had profited by his treason, owed him, over and above the promised reward, aid and protection.

But the servants shunned him. They would not allow him a seat at the kitchen table, nor would the grooms allow him to sleep in the stables. They threw him a bone, as they would have thrown it to a dog; and he slept where he could.

He bore all this uncomplainingly, deeming himself fortunate in being able to purchase comparative safety at such a price.

But when the duke returned from Paris with a policy of forgetfulness and conciliation in his pocket, he would no longer tolerate the presence of this man, who was the object of universal execration.

He ordered the dismissal of Chupin.

The latter resisted, swearing that he would not leave Sairmeuse unless he was forcibly expelled, or unless he received the order from the lips of the duke himself.

This obstinate resistance was reported to the duke. It made him hesitate; but the necessity of the moment, and a word from Martial, decided him.

He sent for Chupin and told him that he must not visit Sairmeuse again under any pretext whatever, softening the harshness of expulsion, however, by the offer of a small sum of money.

But Chupin sullenly refused the money, gathered his belongings together, and departed, shaking his clenched fist at the chateau, and vowing vengeance on the Sairmeuse family. Then he went to his old home, where his wife and his two boys still lived.

He seldom left the house, and then only to satisfy his passion for hunting. At such times, instead of hiding and surrounding himself with every precaution, as he had done, before shooting a squirrel or a few partridges, in former times, he went boldly to the Sairmeuse or the Courtornieu forests, shot his game, and brought it home openly, almost defiantly.

The rest of the time he spent in a state of semi-intoxication, for he drank constantly and more and more immoderately. When he had taken more than usual, his wife and his sons generally attempted to obtain money from him, and if persuasions failed they resorted to blows.

For he had never given them the reward of his treason. What had he done with the twenty thousand francs in gold which had been paid him? No one knew. His sons believed he had buried it somewhere; but they tried in vain to wrest his secret from him.

All the people in the neighborhood were aware of this state of affairs, and

regarded it as a just punishment for the traitor. Madame Blanche overheard one of the gardeners telling the story to two of his assistants:

"Ah, the man is an old scoundrel!" he said, his face crimson with indignation. "He should be in the galleys, and not at large among respectable people."

"He is a man who would serve your purpose," the voice of hatred whispered in Blanche's ear.

"But how can I find an opportunity to confer with him?" she wondered. Madame Blanche was too prudent to think of hazarding a visit to his house, but she remembered that he hunted occasionally in the Courtornieu woods, and that it might be possible for her to meet him there.

"It will only require a little perseverance and a few long walks," she said to herself.

But it cost poor Aunt Medea, the inevitable chaperon, two long weeks of almost continued walking.

"Another freak!" groaned the poor relative, overcome with fatigue; "my niece is certainly crazy!"

But one lovely afternoon in May Blanche discovered what she sought.

It was in a sequestered spot near the lake. Chupin was tramping sullenly along with his gun in his hand, glancing suspiciously on every side! Not that he feared the game-keeper or a verbal process, but wherever he went, he fancied he saw Balstain walking in his shadow, with that terrible knife in his hand.

Seeing Madame Blanche he tried to hide himself in the forest, but she prevented it by calling:

"Father Chupin!"

He hesitated for a moment, then he paused, dropped his gun, and waited.

Aunt Medea was pale with fright.

"Blessed Jesus!" she murmured, pressing her niece's arm; "why do you call that terrible man?"

"I wish to speak with him."

"What, Blanche, do you dare——"

"I must!"

"No, I cannot allow it. I must not——"

"There, that is enough," said Blanche, with one of those imperious glances that deprive a dependent of all strength and courage; "quite enough."

Then, in gentler tones:

"I must talk with this man," she added. "You, Aunt Medea, will remain at a little distance. Keep a close watch on every side, and if you see any one approaching, call me, whoever it may be."

Aunt Medea, submissive as she was ever wont to be, obeyed; and Madame Blanche advanced towards the old poacher, who stood as motionless as the trunks of the giant trees around him.

"Well, my good Father Chupin, what sort of sport have you had to-day!" she began, when she was a few steps from him.

"What do you want with me?" growled Chupin; "for you do want something, or you would not trouble yourself about such as I."

It required all Blanche's determination to repress a gesture of fright and of disgust; but, in a resolute tone, she replied:

"Yes, it is true that I have a favor to ask you."

"Ah, ha! I supposed so."

"A mere trifle which will cost you no trouble and for which you shall be well paid."

She said this so carelessly that one would really have supposed the service was unimportant; but cleverly as she played her part, Chupin was not deceived.

"No one asks trifling services of a man like me," he said coarsely.

"Since I have served the good cause, at the peril of my life, people seem to suppose that they have a right to come to me with their money in their hands, when they desire any dirty work done. It is true that I was well paid for that other job; but I would like to melt all the gold and pour it down the throats of those who gave it to me.

"Ah! I know what it costs the humble to listen to the words of the great! Go your way; and if you have any wickedness in your head, do it yourself!"

He shouldered his gun and was moving away, when Madame Blanche said, coldly:

"It was because I knew your wrongs that I stopped you; I thought you would be glad to serve me, because I hate the Sairmeuse."

These words excited the interest of the old poacher, and he paused.

"I know very well that you hate the Sairmeuse now—but—"

"But what!"

"In less than a month you will be reconciled. And you will pay the expenses of the war and of the réconciliation? That old wretch, Chupin—"

"We shall never be reconciled."

"Hum!" he growled, after deliberating awhile. "And if I should aid you, what compensation will you give me?"

"I will give you whatever you desire—money, land, a house—"

"Many thanks. I desire something quite different."

"What? Name your conditions."

Chupin reflected a moment, then he replied:

"This is what I desire. I have enemies—I do not even feel safe in my own house. My sons abuse me when I have been drinking; my wife is quite capable of poisoning my wine; I tremble for my life and for my money. I cannot endure this existence much longer. Promise me

an asylum in the Chateau de Courtornieu, and I am yours. In your house I shall be safe. But let it be understood, I will not be ill-treated by the servants as I was at Sairmeuse."

"It shall be as you desire."

"Swear it by your hope of heaven."

"I swear."

There was such an evident sincerity in her accent that Chupin was reassured. He leaned towards her, and said, in a low voice:

"Now tell me your business."

His small gray eyes glittered with a demoniac light; his thin lips were tightly drawn over his sharp teeth; he was evidently expecting some proposition to murder, and he was ready.

His attitude showed this so plainly that Blanche shuddered.

"Really, what I ask of you is almost nothing," she replied. "I only wish you to watch the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

"Your husband?"

"Yes; my husband. I wish to know what he does, where he goes, and what persons he sees. I wish to know how each moment of his time is spent.

"What! seriously, frankly, is this all that you desire of me?" Chupin asked.

"For the present, yes. My plans are not yet decided. It depends upon circumstances what action I shall take."

"You can rely upon me," he responded; "but I must have a little time."

"Yes, I understand. To-day is Saturday; will you be ready to report on Thursday?"

"In five days? Yes, probably."

"In that case, meet me here on Thursday, at this same hour."

A cry from Aunt Medea interrupted them.

"Some one is coming!" Madame Blanche exclaimed. "Quick! we must not be seen together. Conceal yourself."

With a bound the old poacher disappeared in the forest.

A servant had approached Aunt Medea, and was speaking to her with great animation.

Blanche hastened towards them.

"Ah! mademoiselle," exclaimed the servant, "we have been seeking you everywhere for three hours. Your father, M. le Marquis—*mon Dieu*! what a misfortune! A physician has been summoned."

"Is my father dead?"

"No, mademoiselle, no; but—how can I tell you. When the marquis went out this morning his actions were very strange, and—and—when he returned—"

As he spoke the servant tapped his forehead with the end of his forefinger.

"You understand me, mademoiselle—when he returned, reason had fled!"

Without waiting for her terrified aunt, Blanche darted in the direction of the chateau.

"How is the marquis!" she inquired of the first servant whom she met.

"He is in his room on the bed; he is more quiet now."

She had already reached his room. He was seated upon the bed, and two servants were watching his every movement. His face was livid, and a white foam had gathered upon his lips. Still, he recognized his daughter.

"Here you are," said he. "I was waiting for you."

She remained upon the threshold, quite overcome, although she was neither tender-hearted nor impressionable.

"My father!" she faltered. "Good heavens! what has happened?" He uttered a discordant laugh.

"Ah, ha!" he exclaimed, "I met him. Do you doubt me? I tell you that I saw the wretch. I know him well; have I not seen his cursed face before my eyes for more than a month—for it never leaves me. I saw him. It was in the forest near the Sanguille rocks. You know the place; it is always dark there, on account of the trees. I was returning slowly, thinking of him, when suddenly he sprang up before me, extending his arms as if to bar my passage.

"'Come,' said he, 'you must come and join me.' He was armed with a gun; he fired—"

The marquis paused, and Blanche summoned sufficient courage to approach him. For more than a minute she fastened upon him that cold and persistent look that is said to exercise such power over those who have lost their reason; then, shaking him energetically by the arm, she said, almost roughly:

"Control yourself, father. You are the victim of an hallucination. It is impossible that you have seen—the man of whom you speak."

Who it was that M. de Courtornieu supposed he had seen, Blanche knew only too well; but she dared not, could not, utter the name.

But the marquis had resumed his incoherent narrative.

"Was I dreaming?" he continued. "No, it was certainly Lacheneur who confronted me. I am sure of it, and the proof is, that he reminded me of a circumstance which occurred in my youth, and which was known only to him and me. It happened during the Reign of Terror. He was all-powerful in Montaignac; and I was accused of being in correspondence with the *emigres*. My property had been confiscated; and every moment I was expecting to feel the hand of the executioner upon my shoulder, when Lacheneur took me into his house. He concealed me; he furnished me with a passport; he saved my money, and he saved

my head—I sentenced him to death. That is the reason why I have seen him again. I must rejoin him; he told me so—I am a dying man!"

He fell back upon his pillows, pulled the sheet up over his face, and, lying there, rigid and motionless, one might readily have supposed it was a corpse, whose outlines could be vaguely discerned through the bed-coverings.

Mute with horror, the servants exchanged frightened glances.

Such baseness and ingratitude amazed them. It seemed incomprehensible to them, under such circumstances, that the marquis had not pardoned Lacheneur.

Madame Blanche alone retained her presence of mind. Turning to her father's valet, she said:

"It is not possible that any one has attempted to injure my father?"

"I beg your pardon, mademoiselle, a little more and he would have been killed."

"How do you know this?"

"In undressing the marquis I noticed that he had received a wound in the head. I also examined his hat, and in it I found three holes, which could only have been made by bullets."

The worthy valet de chambre was certainly more agitated than the daughter.

"Then some one must have attempted to assassinate my father," she murmured, "and this attack of delirium has been brought on by fright. How can we find out who the would-be murderer was?"

The servant shook his head.

"I suspect that old poacher, who is always prowling around, is the guilty man—Chupin."

"No, it could not have been he."

"Ah! I am almost sure of it. There is no one else in the neighborhood capable of such an evil deed."

Madame Blanche could not give her reasons for declaring Chupin innocent. Nothing in the world would have induced her to admit that she had met him, talked with him for more than half an hour, and just parted from him.

She was silent. In a few moments the physician arrived.

He removed the covering from M. de Courtornieu's face—he was almost compelled to use force to do it—examined the patient with evident anxiety, then ordered mustard plasters, applications of ice to the head, leeches, and a potion, for which a servant was to gallop to Montaignac at once. All was bustle and confusion.

When the physician left the sick-room, Madame Blanche followed him.

"Well, doctor," she said, with a questioning look.

With considerable hesitation, he replied:

"People sometimes recover from such attacks."

It really mattered little to Blanche whether her father recovered or died, but she felt that an opportunity to recover her lost *prestige* was now afforded her. If she desired to turn public opinion against Martial, she must improvise for herself an entirely different reputation. If she could erect a pedestal upon which she could pose as a patient victim, her satisfaction would be intense. Such an occasion now offered itself, and she seized it at once.

Never did a devoted daughter lavish more touching and delicate attentions upon a sick father. It was impossible to induce her to leave his bedside for a moment. It was only with great difficulty that they could persuade her to sleep for a couple of hours, in an arm-chair in the sick-room.

But while she was playing the role of Sister of Charity which she had imposed upon herself, her thoughts followed Chupin. What was he doing in Montaignac? Was he watching Martial as he had promised? How slow the day appointed for the meeting was in coming!

It came at last, however, and after entrusting her father to the care of Aunt Medea, Blanche made her escape.

The old poacher was awaiting her at the appointed place.

"Speak!" said Madame Blanche.

"I would do so willingly, only I have nothing to tell you"

"What! you have not watched the marquis?"

"Your husband? Excuse me, I have followed him like his own shadow. But what would you have me say to you; Since the duke left for Paris, your husband has charge of everything. Ah! you would not recognize him! He is always busy now. He is up at cock-crow; and he goes to bed with the chickens. He writes letters all the morning. In the afternoon he receives all who call upon him. The retired officers are hand and glove with him. He has reinstated five or six of them, and he has granted persions to two others. He seldom goes out, and never in the evening."

He paused, and for more than a minute Blanche was silent. She was confused and agitated by the question that rose to her lips. What humiliation! But she conquered her embarrassment, and turning away her head to hide her crimson face, she said:

"But he certainly has a mistress!"

Chupin burst into a noisy laugh.

"Well, we have come to it at last," he said, with an audacious familiarity that made Blanche shudder. "You mean that scoundrel Lacheneur's daughter, do you not? that stuck-up minx, Marie-Anne?"

Blanche felt that denial was useless.

"Yes," she answered; "it is Marie-Anne that I mean."

"Ah well! she has been neither seen nor heard from. She must have fled with another of her lovers, Maurice d'Escorval."

"You are mistaken."

"Oh, not at all! Of all the Lacheneurs only Jean remains, and he live like the vagabond that he is, by poaching and stealing. Day and night he rambles through the woods with his gun on his shoulder. He is frightful to look upon, a perfect skeleton, and his eyes glitter like live coals. If he ever meets me, my account will be settled then and there."

Blanche turned pale. It was Jean Lacheneur who had fired at the marquis then. She did not doubt it in the least.

"Very well!" said she, "I, myself, am sure that Marie-Anne is in the neighborhood, concealed in Montaignac, probably I must know. Endeavor to discover her retreat before Monday, when I will meet you here again."

"I will try," Chupin answered.

He did indeed try; he exerted all his energy and cunning, but in vain. He was fettered by the precautions which he took against Balstain and against Jean Lacheneur. On the other hand, no one in the neighborhood would have consented to give him the least information

"Still no news!" he said to Madame Blanche at each interview.

But she would not yield. Jealousy will not yield even to evidence.

Blanche had declared that Marie-Anne had taken her husband from her, that Martial and Marie-Anne loved each other, hence it must be so, all proofs to the contrary notwithstanding.

But one morning, she found her spy jubilant,

"Good news!" he cried, as soon as he saw her; "we have caught the minx at last."

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

It was the second day after Marie-Anne's installation at the Borderie.

That event was the general topic of conversation; and Chanlouineau's will was the subject of countless comments.

"Here is M. Lacheneur's daughter with an income of more than two thousand francs, without counting the house, said the old people, gravely.

"An honest girl would have had no such luck as that!" muttered the unattractive maidens who had not been fortunate enough to secure husbands.

This was the great news which Chupin brought to Madame Blanche.

She listened to it, trembling with anger, her hands so convulsively clenched that the nails penetrated the flesh.

"What audacity!" she exclaimed. "What impudence!"

The old poacher seemed to be of the same opinion.

"If each of her lovers gives her as much she will be richer than a queen. She will have enough to buy both Sarmeuse and Courtornieu, if she choose," he remarked, maliciously.

If he had desired to augment the rage of Madame Blanche, he had good reason to be satisfied.

"And this is the woman who has alienated Martial's heart from me!" she exclaimed. "It is for this miserable wretch that he abandons me!"

The unworthiness of the unfortunate girl whom she regarded as her rival, incensed her to such a degree that she entirely forgot Chupin's presence. She made no attempt to restrain herself or to hide the secret of her sufferings.

"Are you sure that what you tell me is true?" she asked.

"As sure as that you stand there."

"Who told you all this?"

"No one—I have eyes. I went to the Borderie yesterday to see for myself, and all the shutters were open. Marie-Anne was leaning out of a window. She does not even wear mourning, the heartless hussy!"

Poor Marie-Anne indeed, had no dress but the one which Madame d'Escorval had given her on the night of the insurrection, when she laid aside her masculine habiliments.

Chupin wished to irritate Madame Blanche still more by other malicious remarks, but she checked him by a gesture.

"So you know the way to the Borderie?" she inquired.

"Perfectly."

"Where is it?"

"Opposite the mills of the Oiselle, near the river, about a league and a half from here."

"That is true. I remember now. Were you ever in the house?"

"More than a hundred times while Chanlouineau was living."

"Explain the topography of the dwelling?

Chupin's eyes dilated to their widest extent.

"What do you wish?" he asked, not understanding in the least what was required of him.

"I mean, explain how the house is constructed."

"Ah! now I understand. The house is built upon an open space a little distance from the road. Before it is a small garden, and behind it an orchard enclosed by a hedge. Back of the orchard, to the right, are the vineyards; but on the left

side is a small grove that shades a spring.

He paused suddenly, and with a knowing wink, inquired:

"But what use do you expect to make of all this information?"

"What does that matter to you? How is the interior arranged?"

"There are three large square rooms on the ground floor, besides the kitchen and a small dark room."

"Now, what is on the floor above?"

"I have never been up there."

"How are the rooms furnished which you have visited!"

"Like those in any peasant's house."

Certainly no one was aware of the existence of the luxurious apartment which Chanlouineau had intended for Marie-Anne. He had never spoken of it, and had even taken the greatest precautions to prevent any one from seeing him transport the furniture.

"How many doors are there?" inquired Blanche.

"Three; one opening into the garden, another into the orchard, another communicating with the stables. The staircase leading to the floor above is in the middle room.

"And is Marie-Anne alone at the Borderie?'

"Entirely alone at present; but I suppose it will not be long before her brigand of a brother joins her."

Madame Blanche fell into a reverie so deep and so prolonged that Chupin at last became impatient.

He ventured to touch her upon the arm, and, in a wily voice, he said:

"Well, what shall we decide?"

Blanche shuddered like a wounded man on hearing the terrible click of the surgeon's instruments.

"My mind is not yet made up." she replied. "I must reflect—I will see."

And remarking the old poacher's discontented face, she said, vehemently:

"I will do nothing lightly. Do not lose sight of Martial. If he goes to the Borderie, and he will go there, I must be informed of it. If he writes, and he will write, try to procure one of his letters. I must see you every other day. Do not rest! Strive to deserve the good place I am reserving for you at Courtornieu. Go!"

He departed without a word, but also without attempting to conceal his disappointment and chagrin.

"It serves you right for listening to a silly, affected woman," he growled. "She fills the air with her ravings; she wishes to kill everybody, to burn and destroy everything. She only asks for an opportunity. The occasion presents itself, and her heart fails her. She draws back—she is afraid!"

Chupin did Madame Blanche great injustice. The man was [illegible] he had observed was the instinctive revolt of the flesh, and not a faltering of her inflexible will.

Her reflections were not of a nature to appease her rancor.

Whatever Chupin and all Sairmeuse might say to the contrary, Blanche regarded this story of Marie-Anne's travels as a ridiculous fable. In her opinion, Marie-Anne had simply emerged from the retreat where Martial had deemed it prudent to conceal her.

But why this sudden re-appearance? The vindictive woman was ready to swear that it was out of mere bravado, and intended only as an insult to her.

"And I will have my revenge," she thought. "I would tear my heart out if it were capable of cowardly weakness under such provocation!"

The voice of conscience was unheard in this tumult of passion. Her sufferings, and Jean Lacheneur's attempt upon her father's life, seemed to justify the most extreme measures.

She had plenty of time now to brood over her wrongs, and to concoct schemes of vengeance. Her father no longer required her care. He had passed from the frenzied ravings of insanity and delirium to the stupor of idiocy.

The physician declared his patient cured.

Cured! The body was cured, perhaps, but reason had succumbed, All traces of intelligence had disappeared from this once mobile face, so ready to assume any expression which the most consummate hypocrisy required.

There was no longer a sparkle in the eye which had formerly gleamed with cunning, and the lower lip hung with a terrible expression of stupidity.

And there was no hope of any improvement.

A single passion, the table, took the place of all the passions which had formerly swayed the life of this ambitious man.

The marquis, who had always been temperate in his habits, now ate and drank with the most disgusting voracity, and he was becoming immensely corpulent. A soulless body he wandered about the chateau and its surroundings without projects, without aim. Self-consciousness, all thought of dignity, knowledge of good and evil, memory—he had lost all these. Even the instinct of self-preservation, the last which dies within us, had departed, and he had to be watched like a child.

Often, as the marquis roamed about the large gardens, his daughter regarded him from her window with a strange terror in her heart.

But this warning of Providence only increased her desire for revenge.

"Who would not prefer death to such a

misfortune?" she murmured. "Ah! Jean Lacheneur's revenge is far more terrible than it would have been had his bullet pierced my father's heart. It is a revenge like this that I desire. It is due me; I will have it!"

She saw Chupin every two or three days; sometimes going to the place of meeting alone, sometimes accompanied by Aunt Medea.

The old poacher came punctually, although he was beginning to tire of his task.

"I am risking a great deal," he growled. "I supposed that Jean Lacheneur would go and live at the Borderie with his sister. Then, I should be safe. But no; the brigand continues to prowl around with his gun under his arm, and to sleep in the woods at night. What game is he hunting? Father Chupin, of course. On the other hand, I know that my rascally inn-keeper over there has abandoned his inn and mysteriously disappeared. Where is he? Hidden behind one of these trees, perhaps, deciding in which portion of my body he shall plunge his knife."

What irritated the old poacher most of all was, that after two months of surveillance, he had arrived at the conclusion that, whatever might have been the relations existing between Martial and Marie-Anne in the past, all was now over between them.

But Blanche would not admit this.

"Say that they are more cunning than you, Father Chupin."

"Cunning—and how? Since I have been watching the marquis, he has not once passed outside the fortifications. On the other hand, the postman at Sairmeuse, who has been adroitly questioned by my wife, declares that he has not taken a single letter to the Borderie."

Had it not been for the hope of a safe and pleasant retreat at Courtornieu, Chupin would have abandoned his task; and, in spite of the tempting rewards that were promised him, he had relaxed his surveillance.

If he still came to the rendezvous, it was only because he had fallen into the habit of claiming some money for his expenses each time.

And when Madame Blanche demanded an account of everything that Martial had done, he told her anything that came into his head.

Madame Blanche soon discovered this. One day, early in September, she interrupted him as he began the same old story, and, looking him steadfastly in the eye, she said:

"Either you are betraying me, or you are a fool. Yesterday Martial and Marie-Anne spent a quarter of an hour together at the Croix-d'Arcy."

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

THE old physician at Vigano, who had come to Marie-Anne's aid, was an honorable man. His intellect was of a superior order, and his heart was equal to his intelligence. He knew life; he had loved and suffered, and he possessed two sublime virtues—forbearance and charity.

It was easy for such a man to read Marie-Anne's character; and while he was at the Borderie he endeavored in every possible way to reassure her, and to restore the self-respect of the unfortunate girl who had confided in him.

Had he succeeded? He certainly hoped so.

But when he departed and Marie-Anne was again left in solitude, she could not overcome the feeling of despondency that stole over her.

Many, in her situation, would have regained their serenity of mind, and even rejoiced. Had she not succeeded in concealing her fault? Who suspected it, except, perhaps, the abbe?

Hence, Marie-Anne had nothing to fear, and everything to hope.

But this conviction did not appease her sorrow. Hers was one of those pure and proud natures that are more sensitive to the whisperings of conscience than to the clamors of the world.

She had been accused of having three lovers; Chanlouineau, Martial, and Maurice. The calumny had not moved her. What tortured her was what these people did not know—the truth.

Nor was this all. The sublime instinct of maternity had been awakened within her. When she saw the physician depart, bearing her child, she felt as if soul and body were being rent asunder. When could she hope to see again this little son who was doubly dear to her by reason of the very sorrow and anguish he had cost her? The tears gushed to her eyes when she thought that his first smile would not be for her.

Ah! had it not been for her promise to Maurice, she would unhesitatingly have braved public opin on, and kept her precious child.

Her brave and honest nature could have endured any humiliation far better than the continual lie she was forced to live.

But she had promised; Maurice was her husband, and reason told her that for his sake she must preserve not her honor, alas! but the semblance of honor.

And when she thought of her brother, her blood froze in her veins.

Having learned that Jean was roving

about the country, she sent for him; but it was not without much persuasion that he consented to come to the Borderie."

It was easy to explain Chupin's terror when one saw Jean Lacheneur. His clothing was literally in tatters, his face wore an expression of ferocious despair, and a fierce unextinguishable hatred burned in his eyes.

When he entered the cottage, Marie-Anne recoiled in horror. She did not recognize him until he spoke.

"It is I, sister," he said, gloomily.

"You—my poor Jean! you!"

He surveyed himself from head to foot, and said, with a sneering laugh:

"Really I should not like to meet myself at dusk in the forest."

Marie-Anne shuddered. She fancied that a threat lurked beneath these ironical words, beneath this mockery of himself.

"What a life yours must be, my poor brother! Why did you not come sooner? Now, I have you here, I shall not let you g . You will not desert me. I need protection and love so much. You will remain with me?"

"It is impossible, Marie-Anne."

"And why?"

A fleeting crimson suffused Jean Lacheneur's cheek; he hesitated for a moment, then:

"Because I have a right to dispose of my own life, but not of yours," he replied. "We can no longer be anything to each other. I deny you to-day, that you may be able to deny me to-morrow. Yes, I renounce you, who are my all—the only person on earth whom I love. Your most cruel enemies have not calumniated you more foully than I——"

He paused an instant, then he added:

"I have said openly, before numerous witnesses, that I would never set foot in a house that had been given you by Chanlouineau."

"Jean! you, my brother! said that?"

"I said it. It must be supposed that there is a deadly feud between us. This must be, in order that neither you nor Maurice d'Escorval can be accused of complicity in any deed of mine."

Marie-Anne stood as if petrified.

"He is mad!" she murmured.

"Do I really have that appearance?"

She shook off the stupor that paralyzed her, and seizing her brother's hands:

"What do you intend to do?" she exclaimed. "What do you intend to do? Tell me; I will know."

"Nothing! let me alone."

"Jean!"

"Let me alone," he said roughly, disengaging himself.

A horrible presentiment crossed Marie-Anne's mind.

She stepped back, and solemnly, entreatingly, she said:

"Take care, take care, my brother. It is not well to tamper with these matters. Leave to God's justice the task of punishing those who have wronged us."

But nothing could move Jean Lacheneur, or divert him from his purpose. He uttered a hoarse, discordant laugh, then striking his gun heavily with his hand, he exclaimed:

"Here is justice!"

Appalled and distressed beyond measure, Marie-Anne sank into a chair. She discerned in her brother's mind the same fixed, fatal idea which had lured her father on to destruction—the idea for which he had sacrificed all — family, friends, fortune, the present and the future—even his daughter's honor—the idea which had caused so much blood to flow, which had cost the life of so many innocent men, and which had finally conducted him to the scaffold.

"Jean," she murmured, "remember our father."

The young man's face became livid; his hands clenched involuntarily, but he controlled his anger.

Advancing toward his sister, in a cold quiet tone that added a frightful violence to his threats, he said:

"It is because I remember my father that justice shall be done. Ah! these miserable nobles would not display such audacity if all sons had my resolution. A scoundrel would hesitate before attacking a good man if he was obliged to say to himself: 'I cannot strike this honest man, for though he die, his children will surely call me to account. Their fury will fall on me and mine; they will pursue us sleeping and waking, pursue us without ceasing, everywhere, and pitilessly. Their hatred always on the alert, will accompany us and surround us. It will be an implacable, merciless warfare. I shall never venture forth without fearing a bullet; I shall never lift food to my lips without dread of poison. And until we have succumbed, they will prowl about our house, trying to slip in through tiniest opening death, dishonor, ruin, infamy and misery!' "

He paused with a nervous laugh, and then, still more slowly, he added:

"That is what the Sairmeuse and Courtornieu have to expect from me."

It was impossible to mistake the meaning of Jean Lacheneur's words. His threats were not the wild ravings of anger. His quiet manner, his icy tones, his automatic gestures betrayed one of those cold rages which endure so long as the man lives.

He took good care to make himself understood, for between his teeth, he added:

"Undoubtedly, these people are very high, and I am very low; but when a tiny worm fastens itself to the roots of a giant oak, that tree is doomed.

Marie-Anne knew all too well the uselessness of prayers and entreaties.

And yet she could not, she must not allow her brother to depart in this mood.

She fell upon her knees, and with clasped hands and supplicating voice:

"Jean," said she, "I implore you to renounce these projects. In the name of our mother, return to your better self. These are crimes which you are meditating!"

With a glance of scorn and a shrug of the shoulders, he replied:

"Have done with this. I was wrong to confide my hopes to you. Do not make me regret that I came here."

Then the sister tried another plan. She rose, forced her lips to smile, and as if nothing unpleasant had passed between them, she begged Jean to remain with her that evening, at least, and share her frugal supper.

"Remain," she entreated; "that is not much to do—and it will make me so happy. And since it will be the last time we shall see each other for years, grant me a few hours. It is so long since we have met. I have suffered so much. I have so many things to tell you! Jean, my dear brother, can it be that you love me no longer?"

One must have been bronze to remain insensible to such prayers. Jean Lacheneur's heart swelled almost to bursting; his stern features relaxed, and a tear trembled in his eye.

Marie-Anne saw that tear. She thought she had conquered, and clapping her hands in delight, she exclaimed:

"Ah! you will remain! you will remain!"

No. Jean had already mastered his momentary weakness, though not without a terrible effort; and in a harsh voice:

"Impossible! impossible!" he repeated.

Then, as his sister clung to him imploringly, he took her in his arms and pressed her to his heart.

"Poor sister—poor Marie-Anne—you will never know what it costs me to refuse you, to separate myself from you. But this must be. In even coming here, I have been guilty of an imprudent act. You do not understand to what perils you will be exposed if people suspect any bond between us. I trust you and Maurice may lead a calm and happy life. It would be a crime for me to mix you up with my wild schemes. Think of me sometimes, but do not try to see me, or even to learn what has become of me. A man like me struggles, triumphs, or perishes alone."

He kissed Marie-Anne passionately, then lifted her, placed her in a chair, and freed himself from her detaining hands.

"Adieu!" he cried; "when you see me again, our father will be avenged!"

She sprang up to rush after him and to call him back—too late!

He had fled.

"It is over," murmured the wretched girl; "my brother is lost, Nothing will restrain him now."

A vague, inexplicable, but horrible fear, contracted her heart. She felt that she was being slowly but surely drawn into a whirlpool of passion, rancor, vengeance, and crime, and a voice whispered that she would be crushed.

But other thoughts soon replaced these gloomy presentiments.

One evening, while she was preparing her little table, she heard a rustling sound at the door. She turned and looked: some one had slipped a letter under the door.

Courageously, and without an instant's hesitation, she sprang to the door and opened it. No one was there!

The night was dark, and she could distinguish nothing in the gloom without. She listened; not a sound broke the stillness.

Agitated and trembling she picked up the letter, approached the light, and looked at the address.

"The Marquis de Sairmeuse!" she exclaimed, in amazement.

She recognized Martial's hand-writing. So he had written to her! He had dared to write to her!

Her first impulse was to burn the letter; she held it to the flame, then the thought of her friends concealed at Father Poignot's farm made her withdraw it.

"For their sake," she thought, "I must read it."

She broke the seal with the arms of the De Sairmeuse family inscribed upon it, and read:

"My dear Marie-Anne—Perhaps you have suspected who it is that has given an entirely new, and certainly surprising, direction to events.

"Perhaps you have also understood the motives that guided him. In that case I am amply repaid for my efforts, for you cannot refuse me your friendship and your esteem.

"But my work of reparation is not yet accomplished. I have prepared everything for a revision of the judgment that condemned Baron d'Escorval to death, or for procuring a pardon.

"You must know where the baron is concealed. Acquaint him with my plans and ascertain whether he prefers a revision of judgment, or a simple pardon.

"If he desires a new trial, I will give him a letter of license from the king.

"I await your reply before acting.

"Martial de Sairmeuse."

Marie-Anne's head whirled.

This was the second time that Martial had astonished her by the grandeur of his passion.

How noble the two men who had loved her and whom she had rejected, had proved themselves to be.

One, Chanlouineau, after dying for her sake, protected her still.

Martial de Sairmeuse had sacrificed the convictions of his life and the prejudice of his race for her sake; and, with a noble recklessness, hazarded for her the political fortunes of his house.

And yet the man whom she had chosen, the father of her child, Maurice d'Escorval, had not given a sign of life since he quitted her, five months before.

But suddenly and without reason, Marie-Anne passed from the most profound admiration to the deepest distrust.

"What if Martial's offer is only a trap?" This was the suspicion that darted through her mind.

"Ah!" she thought, "the Marquis de Sairmeuse would be a hero if he were sincere!"

And she did not wish him to be a hero.

The result of these suspicions was that she hesitated five days before repairing to the rendezvous where Father Poignot usually awaited her.

When she did go, she found, not the worthy farmer, but Abbe Midon, who had been greatly alarmed by her long absence.

It was night, but Marie-Anne, fortunately, knew Martial's letter by heart.

The abbe made her repeat it twice, the second time very slowly, and when she had concluded:

"This young man," said the priest, "has the voice and the prejudices of his rank and of his education; but his heart is noble and generous,"

And when Marie-Anne disclosed her suspicions:

"You are wrong, my child," said he: "the marquis is certainly sincere. It would be wrong not to take advantage of his generosity. Such, at least, is my opinion. Entrust this letter to me. I will consult the baron, and to-morrow I will tell you our decision."

The abbe was awaiting her with feverish impatience on the same spot, when she rejoined him twenty-four hours later.

"M. d'Escorval agrees with me that we must trust ourselves to the Marquis de Sairmeuse. Only the baron, being innocent, cannot, will not, accept a pardon. He demands a revision of the iniquitous judgment which condemned him."

Although she must have foreseen this determination, Marie-Anne seemed stupefied.

"What!" said she. "M. d'Escorval will give himself up to his enemies! Does not the Marquis de Sairmeuse promise him a letter of license, a safe-conduct from the king?"

"Yes."

She could find no objection, so in a submissive tone, she said:

"In this case, monsieur, I must ask you for a rough draft of the letter I am to write to the marquis."

The priest did not reply for a moment. It was evident that he felt some misgivings. At last, summoning all his courage, he said:

"It would be better not to write."

"But——"

"It is not that I distrust the marquis, not by any means, but a letter is dangerous; it does not always reach the person to whom it is addressed. You must see M. de Sairmeuse,"

Marie-Anne recoiled in horror.

"Never! never!" she exclaimed.

The abbe did not seem surprised.

"I understand your repugnance, my child," he said, gently; "your reputation has suffered greatly through the attentions of the marquis."

"Oh! sir, I entreat you."

"But one should not hesitate, my child, when duty speaks. You owe this sacrifice to an innocent man who has been ruined through your father."

He explained to her all that she must say, and did not leave her until she had promised to see the marquis in person. But the cause of her repugnance was not what the abbe supposed. Her reputation! Alas! she knew that was lost forever. No, it was not that.

A fortnight before she would not have been disquieted by the prospect of this interview. Then, though she no longer hated Martial, he was perfectly indifferent to her, while now——.

Perhaps in choosing the Croix-d'Arcy for the place of meeting, she hoped that this spot, haunted by so many cruel memories, would restore her former aversion.

On pursuing the path leading to the place of rendezvous, she said to herself that Martial would undoubtedly wound her by the tone of careless gallantry which was habitual to him.

But in this she was mistaken. Martial was greatly agitated, but he did not utter a word that was not connected with the baron.

It was only when the conference was ended, and he had consented to all the conditions, that he said, sadly:

"We are friends, are we not?"

In an almost inaudible voice she answered:

"Yes."

And that was all. He remounted his horse which had been held by a servant,

and departed in the direction of Montaignac.

Breathless, with cheeks on fire, Marie-Anne watched him as he disappeared; and then her inmost heart was revealed as by a lightning flash.

"*Mon Dieu!* wretch that I am!" she exclaimed. "Do I not love?—is it possible that I could ever love any other than Maurice, my husband, the father of my child?"

Her voice was still trembling with emotion when she recounted the details of the interview to the abbe. But he did not perceive it. He was thinking only of the baron.

"I was sure that Martial would say "amen," to everything; I was so certain of it that I have made all the arrangements for the baron to leave the farm. He will await, at your house, a safe-conduct from his majesty.

"The close air and the heat of the loft are retarding the baron's recovery," the abbe pursued, "so be prepared for his coming to-morrow evening. One of the Poignot boys will bring over all our baggage. About eleven o'clock we will put M. d'Escorval in a carriage; and we will all sup together at the Borderie."

"Heaven comes to my aid!" thought Marie-Anne as she walked homeward.

She thought that she would no longer be alone, that Mme. d'Escorval would be with her to talk to her of Maurice, and that all the friends who would surround her would aid her in driving away the thoughts of Martial, which haunted her.

So the next day she was more cheerful than she had been for months, and once, while putting her little house in order, she was surprised to find herself singing at her work.

Eight o'clock was sounding when she heard a peculiar whistle.

It was the signal of the younger Poignot, who came bringing an arm-chair for the sick man, the abbe's box of medicines, and a bag of books.

These articles Marie-Anne deposited in the room which Chanlouineau had adorned for her, and which she intended for the baron. After arranging them to her satisfaction she went out to meet young Poignot, who had told her that he would soon return with other articles.

The night was very dark, and Marie-Anne, as she hastened on, did not notice two motionless figures in the shadow of a clump of lilacs in her little garden.

CHAPTER LXXXVIII

DETECTED by Madame Blanche in a palpable falsehood, Chupin was quite crestfallen for a moment.

He saw the pleasing vision of a retreat at Courtornieu vanish; he saw himself suddenly deprived of frequent gifts which permitted him to spare his hoarded treasure, and even to increase it.

But he soon regained his assurance, and with an affectation of frankness he said:

"I may be stupid, but I could not deceive an infant. Some one must have told you falsely."

Mme. Blanche shrugged her shoulders.

"I obtained my information from two persons, who were ignorant of the interest it would possess for me."

"As truly as the sun is in the heavens I swear——"

"Do not swear; simply confess that you have been wanting in zeal."

The young lady's manner betrayed such positive certainty that Chupin ceased his denials and changed his tactics.

With the most abject humility, he admitted that the evening before he had relaxed his surveillance; he had been very busy; one of his boys had injured his foot; then he had encountered some friends who persuaded him to enter a drinking-saloon, where he had taken more than usual, so that——.

He told this story in a whining tone, and every moment he interrupted himself to affirm his repentance and to cover himself with reproaches.

"Old drunkard!" he said, "this will teach you——"

But these protestations, far from reassuring Madame Blanche, made her still more suspicious.

"All this is very well, Father Chupin," she said, dryly, "but what are you going to do now to repair your negligence?"

"What do I intend to do?" he exclaimed, feigning the most violent anger. "Oh! you will see. I will prove that no one can deceive me with impunity. Near the Borderie is a small grove. I shall station myself there; and may the devil seize me if a cat enters that house unbeknown to me."

Mme. Blanche drew her purse from her pocket, and taking out three louis, she gave them to Chupin, saying:

"Take these, and be more careful in future. Another blunder like this, and I shall be compelled to ask the aid of some other person."

The old poacher went away, whistling, quite reassured; but he was wrong. The lady's generosity was only intended to allay his suspicions.

And why should she not suppose he had betrayed her—this miserable wretch, who made it his business to betray others? What reason had she for placing any confidence in his reports? She paid him! Others, by paying him more, would certainly have the preference!

But how could she ascertain what she wished to know? Ah! she saw but one

way—a very disagreeable, but a sure way. She, herself, would play the spy.

This idea took such possession of her mind that, after dinner was concluded, and twilight had enveloped the earth in a mantle of gray, she summoned Aunt Medea.

"Get your cloak, quickly, aunt," she commanded. "I am going for a walk and you must accompany me."

Aunt Medea extended her hand to the bell-rope, but her niece stopped her.

"You will dispense with the services of your maid," said she. "I do not wish any one in the chateau to know that we have gone out."

"Are we going alone?"

"Alone."

"Alone, and on foot, at night——"

"I am in a hurry, aunt," interrupted Blanche, "and I am waiting for you."

In the twinkling of an eye Aunt Medea was ready.

The marquis had just been put to bed, the servants were at dinner, and Blanche and Aunt Medea reached the little gate leading from the garden into the open fields without being observed.

"Good heavens! Where are we going?" groaned Aunt Medea.

"What is that to you? Come!"

Madame Blanche was going to the Borderie.

She could have followed the banks of the Oiselle, but she preferred to cut across the fields, thinking she would be less likely to meet some one.

The night was still, but very dark, and the progress of the two women was often retarded by hedges and ditches. Twice Blanche lost her way. Again and again, Aunt Medea stumbled over the rough ground, and bruised herself against the stones; she groaned, she almost wept, but her terrible niece was pitiless.

"Come!" she said, "or I will leave you to find your way as best you can."

And the poor dependent struggled on.

At last, after a tramp of more than an hour, Blanche ventured to breathe. She recognized Chanlouineau's house, and she paused in the little grove of which Chupin had spoken.

"Are we at our journey's end?" inquired Aunt Medea, timidly.

"Yes, but be quiet. Remain where you are, I wish to look about a little."

"What! you are leaving me alone? Blanche, I entreat you! What are you going to do? *Mon Dieu!* you frighten me. I am afraid, Blanche!"

But her niece had gone. She was exploring the grove, seeking Chupin. She did not find him.

"I knew the wretch was deceiving me," she muttered through her set teeth. "Who knows but Martial and Marie-Anne are there in that house now, mocking me, and laughing at my credulity?"

She rejoined Aunt Medea, whom she found half dead with fright, and both advanced to the edge of the woods, which commanded a view of the front of the house.

A flickering, crimson light gleamed through two windows in the second story. Evidently there was a fire in the room.

"That is right," murmured Blanche, bitterly; "Martial is such a chilly person!"

She was about to approach the house, when a peculiar whistle rooted her to the spot.

She looked about her, and, in spite of the darkness, she discerned in the footpath leading to the Borderie, a man laden with articles which she could not distinguish.

Almost immediately a woman, certainly Marie-Anne, left the house and advanced to meet him.

They exchanged a few words and then walked together to the house. Soon after the man emerged without his burden and went away.

"What does this mean?" murmured Mme. Blanche.

She waited patiently for more than half an hour, and as nothing stirred:

"Let us go nearer," she said to Aunt Medea, "I wish to look through the windows."

They were approaching the house when, just as they reached the little garden, the door of the cottage opened so suddenly that they had scarcely time to conceal themselves in a clump of lilac-bushes.

Marie-Anne came out, imprudently leaving the key in the door, passed down the narrow path, gained the road, and disappeared.

Blanche pressed Aunt Medea's arm with a violence that made her cry out.

"Wait for me here," she said, in a strained, unnatural voice, "and whatever happens, whatever you hear, if you wish to finish your days at Courtornieu, not a word! Do not stir from this spot; I will return."

And she entered the cottage.

Marie-Anne, on going out, had left a candle burning on the table in the front room.

Blanche seized it and boldly began an exploration of the dwelling.

She had gone over the arrangement of the Borderie so often in her own mind that the rooms seemed familiar to her—she seemed to recognize them.

In spite of Chupin's description the poverty of this humble abode astonished her. There was no floor save the ground; the walls were poorly whitewashed; all kinds of grain and bunches of herbs hung suspended from the ceiling; a few heavy tables, wooden benches, and clumsy chairs constituted the entire furniture.

Marie-Anne evidently occupied the back room. It was the only apartment that contained a bed. This was one of those immense country affairs, very high and broad, with tall fluted posts, draped with green serge curtains, sliding back and forth on iron rings.

At the head of the bed, fastened to the wall, hung a receptacle for holy water. Blanche dipped her finger in the bowl; it was full to the brim.

Beside the window was a wooden shelf supported by a hook, and on the shelf stood a basin and bowl of the commonest earthenware.

"It must be confessed that my husband does not provide a very sumptuous abode for his idol," said Madame Blanche, with a sneer.

She was almost on the point of asking herself if jealousy had not led her astray.

She remembered Martial's fastidious tastes, and she did not know how to reconcile them with these meagre surroundings. Then, there was the holy water!

But her suspicions became stronger when she entered the kitchen. Some savory compound was bubbling in a pot over the fire, and several saucepans, in which fragrant stews were simmering, stood among the warm ashes.

"All this cannot be for her," murmured Blanche.

Then she remembered the two windows in the story above which she had seen illuminated by the trembling glow of the fire-light.

"I must examine the rooms above," she thought.

The staircase led up from the middle of the room; she knew this. She quickly ascended the stairs, pushed open a door, and could not repress a cry of surprise and rage.

She found herself in the sumptuously appointed room which Chanlouineau had made the sanctuary of his great love, and upon which he had lavished, with the fanaticism of passion, all that was costly and luxurious.

"Then it is true!" exclaimed Blanche. "And I thought just now that all was too meagre and too poor! Miserable dupe that I am! Below, all is arranged for the eyes of comers and goers. Here, everything is intended exclusively for themselves. Now, I recognize Martial's astonishing talent for dissimulation. He loves this vile creature so much that he is anxious in regard to her reputation; he keeps his visits to her a secret, and this is the hidden paradise of their love. Here they laugh at me, the poor forsaken wife, whose marriage was but a mockery."

She had desired to know the truth; certainty was less terrible to endure than this constant suspicion. And, as if she found a little enjoyment in proving the extent of Martial's love for a hated rival, she took an inventory, as it were, of the magnificent appointments of the chamber, feeling the heavy brocaded silk stuff that formed the curtains, and testing the thickness of the rich carpet with her foot.

Everything indicated that Marie-Anne was expecting some one; the bright fire, the large arm-chair placed before the hearth, the embroidered slippers lying beside the chair.

And whom could she expect save Martial? The person who had been there a few moments before probably came to announce the arrival of her lover, and she had gone out to meet him.

For a trifling circumstance would seem to indicate that this messenger had not been expected.

Upon the hearth stood a bowl of still smoking *bouillon*.

It was evident that Marie-Anne was on the point of drinking this when she heard the signal.

Madame Blanche was wondering how she could profit by her discovery, when her eyes fell upon a large oaken box standing open upon a table near the glass door leading into the dressing-room, and filled with tiny boxes and vials.

Mechanically she approached it, and among the bottles she saw two of blue glass, upon which the word "poison" was inscribed.

"Poison!" Blanche could not turn her eyes from this word, which seemed to exert a kind of fascination over her.

A diabolical inspiration associated the contents of these vials with the bowl standing upon the mantel.

"And why not?" she murmured. "I could escape afterward."

A terrible thought made her pause. Martial would return with Marie-Anne; who could say that it would not be he who would drink the contents of the bowl.

"God shall decide!" she murmured. "It is better one's husband should be dead than belong to another!"

And with a firm hand, she took up one of the vials.

Since her entrance into the cottage Blanche had scarcely been conscious of her acts. Hatred and despair had clouded her brain like fumes of alcohol.

But when her hand came in contact with the glass containing the deadly drug, the terrible shock dissipated her bewilderment; she regained the full possession of her faculties; the power of calm deliberation returned.

This is proved by the fact that her first thought was this:

"I am ignorant even of the name of the poison which I hold. What dose must I administer, much or little?"

She opened the vial, not without considerable difficulty, and poured a few grains

of its contents into the palm of her hand. It was a fine, white powder, glistening like pulverized glass, and looking not unlike sugar.

"Can it really be sugar?" she thought.

Resolved to ascertain, she moistened the tip of her finger, and collected upon it a few atoms of the powder which she placed upon her tongue.

The taste was like that of an extremely acid apple.

Without hesitation, without remorse, without even turning pale, she poured into the bowl the entire contents of the vial.

Her self-possession was so perfect, she even recollected that the powder might be slow in dissolving, and she stirred it gently for a moment or more.

Having done this—she seemed to think of everything—she tasted the *bouillon*. She noticed a slightly bitter taste, but it was not sufficiently perceptible to awaken distrust.

Now Madame Blanche breathed freely. If she could succeed in making her escape she was avenged.

She was going toward the door when a sound on the stairs startled her.

Two persons were ascending the staircase.

Where should she go? where could she conceal herself?

She was now so sure she would be detected that she almost decided to throw the bowl into the fire, and then boldly face the intruders.

But no—a chance remained—she darted into the dressing-room. She dared not close the door; the least click of the latch would have betrayed her.

Marie-Anne entered the chamber, followed by a peasant, bearing a large bundle.

"Ah! here is my candle!" she exclaimed, as she crossed the threshold. "Joy must be making me lose my wits! I could have sworn that I left it on the table down-stairs."

Blanche shuddered. She had not thought of this circumstance.

"Where shall I put this clothing?" asked the young peasant.

"Lay it down here. I will arrange the articles by and by," replied Marie-Anne.

The boy dropped his heavy burden with a sigh of relief.

"This is the last," he exclaimed, "Now, our gentleman can come."

"At what hour will he start?" inquired Marie-Anne.

"At eleven o'clock. It will be nearly midnight when he gets here."

Marie-Anne glanced at the magnificent clock on the mantel.

"I have still three hours before me," said she; "more time than I shall need. Supper is ready; I am going to set the table here, by the fire. Tell him to bring a good appetite."

"I will tell him, and many thanks, mademoiselle, for having come to meet me and aid me with my second load. It was not so very heavy, but it was clumsy to handle."

"Will you not accept a glass of wine?"

"No, thank you. I must hasten back. *Au revoir*, Mademoiselle Lacheneur."

"*Au revoir*, Poignot."

This name Poignot had no significance in the ears of Blanche.

"Ah! had she heard M. d'Escorval's or the abbe's name mentioned, she might have felt some doubt of Marie-Anne's guilt; her resolution might have wavered, and—who knows?"

But no. Young Poignot, in referring to the baron had said: "our gentleman," Marie-Anne, said: "he."

Is not "he" always the person who is uppermost in our minds, the husband whom one hates or the lover whom one adores?

"Our gentleman!" "he!" Blanche translated Martial.

Yes, it was the Marquis de Sairmeuse who was to arrive at midnight. She was sure of it. It was he who had been preceded by a messenger bearing clothing. This could only mean that he was about to establish himself at the Borderie. Perhaps he would cast aside all secrecy and live there openly, regardless of his rank, of his dignity, and of his duties; forgetful even of his prejudices.

These conjectures inflamed her fury still more.

Why should she hesitate or tremble after that.

Her only dread now, was lest she should be discovered.

Aunt Medea was, it is true, in the garden; but after the orders she had received the poor woman would remain motionless as stone behind the clump of lilacs, the entire night if necessary.

For two hours and a half Marie-Anne would be alone at the Borderie. Blanche reflected that this would give her ample time to watch the effects of the poison upon her hated rival.

When the crime was discovered she would be far away. No one knew she had been absent from Courtornieu; no one had seen her leave the chateau; Aunt Medea would be as silent as the grave. And besides, who would dare to accuse her, Marquise de Sairmeuse *nee* Blanche de Courtornieu, of being the murderer?

"But she does not drink it!" Blanche thought.

Marie-Anne had, in fact, forgotten the *bouillon* entirely. She had opened the bundle of clothing, and was busily arranging the articles in a wardrobe near the bed.

Who talks of presentiments! She was as gay and vivacious as in her days of happiness; and as she worked, she hummed an air that Maurice had often sung.

She felt that her troubles were nearly over; her friends would soon be around her.

When her task of putting away the clothing was completed and the wardrobe closed, she drew a small table up before the fire.

Not until then did she notice the bowl standing upon the mantel.

"Stupid!" she said, with a laugh; and taking the bowl she raised it to her lips.

From her hiding-place Blanche had heard Marie-Anne's exclamation; she saw the movement, and yet not the slightest remorse struck her soul.

Marie-Anne drank but one mouthful, then, in evident disgust, set the bowl down.

A horrible dread made the watcher's heart stand still.

"Does she notice a peculiar taste in the *bouillon?*" she thought.

No; but it had grown cold, and a slight coating of grease had formed over the top. Marie-Anne took the spoon, skimmed the *bouillon*, and then stirred it up for some time, to divide the greasy particles.

After she had done this she drank the liquid, put the bowl back upon the mantel, and resumed her work.

It was done. The denouement no longer depended upon Blanche de Courtornieu's will. Come what would, she was a murderess.

But though she was conscious of her crime, the excess of her hatred prevented her from realizing its enormity. She said to herself that it was only an act of justice which she had accomplished; that the vengeance she had taken was not proportionate to the offense, and that nothing could atone for the torture she had endured.

But in a few moments a sinister apprehension took possession of her mind.

Her knowledge of the effects of poison was extremely limited. She had expected to see Marie-Anne fall dead before her, as if stricken down by a thunderbolt.

But no. The moments slipped by, and Marie-Anne continued her preparations for supper as if nothing had occurred.

She spread a white cloth over the table, smoothed it with her hands, and placed a dish upon it.

"What if she should come in here!" thought Blanche.

The fear of punishment which precedes remorse, made her heart beat with such violence that she could not understand why its throbbings were not heard in the adjoining room. Her terror increased when she saw Marie-Anne take the light and go down-stairs. Blanche was left alone. The thought of making her escape occurred to her; but how, and by what way could she leave the house without being seen.

"It must be that poison does not work!" she said, in a rage.

Alas! no. She knew better when Marie-Anne reappeared.

In the few moments she had spent below, her features had become frightfully changed. Her face was livid and mottled with purple spots, her eyes were distended and glittered with a strange brilliancy. She let the plates which she held fa l upon the table with a crash.

"The poison! it begins!" thought Blanche.

Marie-Anne stood on the hearth, gazing wildly around her, as if seeking the cause of her incomprehensible suffering. She passed and repassed her hand across her forehead, which was bathed in a cold perspiration; she gasped for breath. Then suddenly, overcome with nausea, she staggered, pressed her hands convulsively upon her breast, and sank into the arm-chair, crying:

"Oh, God! how I suffer!"

CHAPTER LXXXIX.

KNEELING by the half-open door, Blanche eagerly watched the workings of the poison which she had administered.

She was so near her victim that she could distinguish the throbbing of her temples, and sometimes she fancied she could feel upon her cheek her rival's breath, which scorched like flame.

An utter prostration followed Marie-Anne's paroxysm of agony. One would have supposed her dead had it not been for the convulsive workings of the jaws and her labored breathing.

But soon the nausea returned, and she was seized with vomiting. Each effort to relieve seemed to wrench her whole body; and gradually a ghastly tint crept over her face, the spots upon her cheeks became more pronounced in tint, her eyes appeared ready to burst from their sockets, and great drops of perspiration rolled down her cheeks.

Her sufferings must have been intolerable. She moaned feebly at times, and occasionally rendered heart-rending shrieks. Then she faltered fragmentary sentences; she begged piteously for water or entreated God to shorten her torture.

"Ah, it is horrible! I suffer too much! Death! My God! grant me death!"

She invoked all the friends she had ever known, calling for aid in a despairing voice.

She called Mme. d'Escorval, the abbe, Maurice, her brother, Chanlouineau, Martial!

Martial!—this name was more than sufficient to extinguish all pity in the heart of Madame Blanche.

"Go on! call your lover, call!" she said to herself, bitterly. "He will come too late."

And as Marie-Anne repeated the name, in a tone of agonized entreaty:

"Suffer!" continued Mme. Blanche, "suffer, you who have inspired Martial with the odious courage to forsake me, his wife, as a drunken lackey would abandon the lowest of degraded creatures! Die, and my husband will return to me repentant."

No, she had no pity. She felt a difficulty in breathing, but that resulted simply from the instinctive horror which the sufferings of others inspire—an entirely different physical impression, which is adorned with the fine name of sensibility, but which is, in reality, the grossest selfishness.

And yet, Marie-Anne was perceptibly sinking. Soon she had not strength even to moan; her eyes closed, and after a spasm which brought a bloody foam to her lips, her head sank back, and she lay motionless.

"It is over," murmured Blanche.

She rose, but her limbs trembled so that she could scarcely stand.

Her heart remained firm and implacable; but the flesh failed.

Never had she imagined a scene like that which she had just witnessed. She knew that poison caused death; she had not suspected the agony of that death.

She no longer thought of augmenting Marie-Anne's sufferings by upbraiding her. Her only desire now was to leave this house, whose very floor seemed to scorch her feet.

A strange, inexplicable sensation crept over her; it was not yet fright, it was the stupor that follows the commission of a terrible crime—the stupor of the murderer.

Still, she compelled herself to wait a few moments longer; then seeing that Marie-Anne still remained motionless and with closed eyes, she ventured to softly open the door and to enter the room in which her victim was lying.

But she had not advanced three steps before Marie-Anne suddenly, and as if she had been galvanized by an electric battery, rose and extended her arms to bar her enemy's passage.

This movement was so unexpected and so frightful that Mme. Blanche recoiled.

"The Marquise de Sairmeuse," faltered Marie-Anne "You, Blanche—here!"

And her suffering, explained by the presence of this young girl who once had been her friend, but who was now her bitterest enemy, she exclaimed:

"You are my murderer!"

Blanche de Courtornieu's was one of those iron natures that break, but never bend.

Since she had been discovered, nothing in the world would induce her to deny her guilt.

She advanced resolutely, and in a firm voice:

"Yes," she said, "I have taken my revenge. Do you think I did not suffer that evening when you sent your brother to take away my newly-wedded husband, upon whose face I have not gazed since?"

"Your husband! I sent to take him away! I do not understand you."

"Do you then dare to deny that you are not Martial's mistress!"

"The Marquis de Sairmeuse! I saw him yesterday for the first time since Baron d'Escorval's escape."

The effort which she had made to rise and to speak had exhausted her strength. She fell back in the arm-chair.

But Blanche was pitiless.

"You have not seen Martial! Tell me, then, who gave you this costly furniture, these silken hangings, all the luxury that surrounds you?"

"Chanlouineau."

Blanche shrugged her shoulders.

"So be it," she said, with an ironical smile, "but is it Chanlouineau for whom you are waiting this evening? Is it for Chanlouineau you have warmed these slippers and laid this table? Was it Chanlouineau who sent his clothing by a peasant named Poignot? You see that I know all——"

But her victim was silent.

"For whom are you waiting?" she insisted. "Answer!"

"I cannot!"

"You know that it is your lover! wretched woman—my husband, Martial!"

Marie-Anne was considering the situation as well as her intolerable sufferings and troubled mind would permit.

Could she tell what guests she was expecting?

To name Baron d'Escorval to Blanche would it not ruin and betray him? They hoped for a safe conduct, a revision of judgment, but he was none the less under sentence of death, executory in twenty-four hours.

"So you refuse to tell me whom you expect here in an hour—at midnight.

"I refuse."

But a sudden impulse took possession of the sufferer's mind.

Though the slightest movement caused her intolerable agony, she tore open her dress and drew from her bosom a folded paper.

"I am not the mistress of the Marquis de Sairmeuse," she said, in an almost inaudible voice; "I am the wife of Maurice d'Escorval. Here is the proof—read."

No sooner had Blanche glanced at the paper, than she became as pale as her victim. Her sight failed her; there was a strange ringing in her ears, a cold sweat started from every pore.

This paper was the marriage-certificate of Maurice and Marie-Anne, drawn up by the cure of Vigano, witnessed by the old physician and Bavois, and sealed with the seal of the parish.

The proof was indisputable. She had committed a useless crime; she had murdered an innocent woman.

The first good impulse of her life made her heart beat more quickly. She did not stop to consider; she forget the danger to which she exposed herself, and in a ringing voice she cried:

"Help! help!"

Eleven o'clock was sounding; the whole country was asleep. The farm-house nearest the Borderie was half a league distant.

The voice of Blanche was lost in the deep stillness of the night.

In the garden below Aunt Medea heard it, perhaps; but she would have allowed herself to be chopped in pieces rather than stir from her place.

And yet, there was one who heard that cry of distress. Had Blanche and her victim been less overwhelmed with despair, they would have heard a noise upon the staircase, which creaked beneath the tread of a man who was cautiously ascending it. But it was not a saviour, for he did not answer the appeal. But even though there had been aid near at hand, it would have come too late.

Marie-Anne felt that there was no longer any hope for her, and that it was the chill of death which was creeping up to her heart. She felt that her life was fast ebbing away.

So, when Blanche seemed about to rush out in search of assistance, she detained her by a gesture, and gently said:

"Blanche."

The murderess paused.

"Do not summon any one; it would do no good. Remain; be calm, that I may at least die in peace. It will not be long, now."

"Hush! do not speak so. You must not, you shall not die! If you should die—great God! what would my life be afterwards?"

Marie-Anne made no reply. The poison was pursuing its work of dissolution. Her breath made a whistling sound as it forced its way through her inflamed throat; her tongue, when she moved it, produced in her mouth the terrible sensation of a piece of red-hot iron; her lips were parched and swollen; her hands, inert and paralyzed, would no longer obey her will.

But the horror of the situation restored Blanche's calmness.

"All is not yet lost," she exclaimed. "It was in that great box there upon the table, where I found"—she dared not utter the word poison—"the white powder which I poured into the bowl. You know this powder; you must know the antidote,"

Marie-Anne sadly shook her head.

"Nothing can save me now," she murmured, in an almost inaudible voice; "but I do not complain. Who knows the misery from which death may preserve me. I do not crave life, I have suffered so much during the past year; I have endured such humiliation; I have wept so much! A curse was upon me!"

She was suddenly endowed with that clearness of mental vision so often granted to the dying. She saw how she had wrought her own undoing by consenting to accept the perfidious role imposed upon her by her father, and how she, herself, had paved the way for the falsehoods, slander, crimes and misfortunes of which she had been the victim.

Her voice grew fainter and fainter. Worn out by suffering, a sensation of drowsiness stole over her. She was falling asleep in the arms of death.

Suddenly such a terrible thought pierced the stupor which enveloped her that she uttered a heart-breaking cry:

"My child!"

Collecting, by a superhuman effort, all the will, energy, and strength that the poison had left her, she straightened herself in her arm-chair, her features contracted by mortal anguish.

"Blanche!" she said, with an energy of which one would have supposed her incapable. "Blanche, listen to me. It is the secret of my life which I am about to disclose; no one suspects it. I have a son by Maurice. Alas! many months have elapsed since my husband disappeared. If he is dead, what will become of my child? Blanche, you, who have killed me, must swear to me that you will be a mother to my child!"

Blanche was utterly overcome.

"I swear!" she sobbed, "I swear!"

"On that condition, but on that condition alone, I pardon you. But take care! Do not forget your oath! Blanche, God sometimes permits the dead to avenge themselves! You have sworn, remember.

"My spirit will allow you no rest if you do not fulfill your vow."

"I will remember," sobbed Blanche; "I will remember. But the child——"

"Ah! I was afraid—cowardly creature that I was! I dreaded the shame—then Maurice insisted—I sent my child away—your jealousy and my death are my

punishment. Poor child! I abandoned him to strangers. Wretched woman that I am! Ah! this suffering is too horrible. Blanche, remember——"

She spoke again, but her words were indistinct, inaudible.

Blanche frantically seized the dying woman's arm, and endeavored to arouse her.

"To whom have you confided your child?" she repeated; "to whom? Marie-Anne—a word more—a single word—a name, Marie-Anne!"

The unfortunate woman's lips moved, but the death-rattle sounded in her throat; a terrible convulsion shook her form; she slid down from the chair, and fell full length upon the floor.

Marie-Anne was dead—dead, and she had not disclosed the name of the old physician at Vigano to whom she had entrusted her child. She was dead, and the terrified murderess stood in the middle of the room, as rigid and motionless as a statue. It seemed to her that madness—a madness like that which had stricken her father—was developing itself in her brain.

She forgot everything; she forgot that a guest was expected at midnight; that time was flying, and that she would surely be discovered if she did not flee.

But the man who had entered when she cried for aid was watching over her. When he saw that Marie-Anne had breathed her last, he made a slight noise at the door, and thrust his leering face into the room.

"Chupin!" faltered Madame Blanche.

"In the flesh," he responded. "This was a grand chance for you. Ah, ha! The business riled your stomach a little, but nonsense! that will soon pass off. But we must not dawdle here; some one may come in. Let us make haste."

Mechanically the murderess advanced; but Marie-Anne's dead body lay between her and the door, barring the passage. To leave the room it was necessary to step over the lifeless form of her victim. She had not courage to do this, and recoiled with a shudder.

But Chupin was troubled by no such scruples. He sprang across the body, lifted Blanche as if she had been a child, and carried her out of the house.

He was drunk with joy. Fears for the future no longer disquieted him, now that Madame Blanche was bound to him by the strongest of chains—complicity in crime.

He saw himself on the threshold of a life of ease and continual feasting. Remorse for Lacheneur's betrayal had ceased to trouble him. He saw himself sumptuously fed, lodged and clothed; above all, effectually guarded by an army of servants.

Blanche, who had experienced a feeling of deadly faintness, was revived by the cool night air.

"I wish to walk," said she.

Chupin placed her on the ground about twenty paces from the house.

"And Aunt Medea!" she exclaimed.

Her relative was beside her; like one of those dogs who are left at the door when their master enters a house, she had instinctively followed her niece on seeing her borne from the cottage by the old poacher.

"We must not stop to talk," said Chupin. "Come, I will lead the way."

And taking Blanche by the arm, he hastened towards the grove.

"Ah! so Marie-Anne had a child," he said, as they hurried on. "She was pretended to be such a saint! But where the devil has she put it?"

"I shall find it."

"Hum! That is easier said than done."

A shrill laugh, resounding in the darkness, interrupted him. He released his hold on the arm of Blanche and assumed an attitude of defense.

Vain precaution! A man concealed behind a tree bounded upon him, and, plunging his knife four times into the old poacher's writhing body, cried:

"Holy Virgin! now is my vow fulfilled! I shall no longer be obliged to eat with my fingers!"

"The inn-keeper!" groaned the wounded man, sinking to the earth.

For once in her life, Aunt Medea manifested some energy.

"Come!" she shrieked, wild with fear, dragging her niece away. "Come—he is dead!"

Not quite. The traitor had strength to crawl home and knock at the door.

His wife and youngest son were sleeping soundly. His eldest son, who had just returned home, opened the door.

Seeing his father prostrate on the ground, he thought he was intoxicated, and tried to lift him and carry him into the house, but the old poacher begged him to desist.

"Do not touch me," said he. "It is all over with me; but listen; Lacheneur's daughter has just been poisoned by Madame Blanche. It was to tell you this that I dragged myself here. This knowledge is worth a fortune, my boy, if you are not a fool!"

And he died, without being able to tell his family where he had concealed the price of Lacheneur's blood.

CHAPTER XC.

Of all the persons who witnessed Baron d'Escorval's terrible fall, the abbe was the only one who did not despair.

What a learned doctor would not have dared to do, he did.

He was a priest; he had faith. He remembered the sublime saying of Ambroise Pare: "I dress the wound: God heals it."

After a six months' sojourn in Father Poignot's secluded farm-house, M. d'Escorval was able to sit up and to walk about a little, with the aid of crutches.

Then he began to be seriously inconvenienced by his cramped quarters in the loft, where prudence compelled him to remain; and it was with transports of joy that he welcomed the idea of taking up his abode at the Borderie with Marie-Anne.

When the day of departure had been decided upon, he counted the minutes as impatiently as a school-boy pining for vacation.

"I am suffocating here," he said to his wife. "I am suffocating. Time drags so slowly. When will the happy day come!"

It came at last. During the morning all the articles which they had succeeded in procuring during their stay at the farm-house were collected and packed; and when night came, Poignot's son began the moving.

"Everything is at the Borderie," said the honest fellow, on returning from his last trip, "and Mlle. Lacheneur bids the baron bring a good appetite."

"I shall have one, never fear!" responded the baron, gayly. "We shall all have one."

Father Poignot himself was busily engaged in harnessing his best horse to the cart which was to convey M. d'Escorval to his new home.

The worthy man's heart grew sad at the thought of the departure of these guests, for whose sake he had incurred such danger. He felt that he should miss them, that the house would seem gloomy and deserted after they left it.

He would allow no one else to perform the task of arranging the mattress comfortably in the cart. When this had been done to his satisfaction, he heaved a deep sigh, and exclaimed:

"It is time to start!"

Slowly he ascended the narrow staircase leading to the loft.

M. d'Escorval had not thought of the moment of parting.

At the sight of the honest farmer, who came towards him, his face crimson with emotion, to bid him farewell, he forgot all the comforts that awaited him at the Borderie, in the remembrance of the loyal and courageous hospitality he had received in the house he was about to leave. The tears sprang to his eyes.

"You have rendered me a service which nothing can repay, Father Poignot," he said, with intense feeling, "You have saved my life."

"Oh! we will not talk of that, baron. In my place, you would have done the same—neither more nor less."

"I shall not attempt to express my thanks, but I hope to live long enough to prove that I am not ungrateful."

The staircase was so narrow that they had considerable difficulty in carrying the baron down; but finally they had him comfortably extended upon his mattress and threw over him a few handsfull of straw, which concealed him entirely.

"Farewell, then!" said the old farmer, when the last hand shake had been exchanged, "or rather *au revoir*, Monsieur le Baron, madame, and you, my good cure."

"All ready?" inquired young Poignot.

"Yes," replied the invalid.

The cart, driven with the utmost caution by the young peasant, started slowly on its way.

Madame d'Escorval, leaning upon the abbe's arm, walked about twenty paces in the rear.

It was very dark, but had it been as light as day the former cure of Sairmeuse might have encountered any of his old parishioners without the least danger of detection.

His hair and his beard had been allowed to grow; his tonsure had entirely disappeared, and his sedentary life had caused him to become much stouter. He was clad like all the well-to-do peasants of the neighborhood, and his face was hidden by a large slouch hat.

He had not felt so tranquil in mind for months. Obstacles which had appeared almost insurmountable had vanished. In the near future he saw the baron declared innocent by impartial judges; he saw himself re-installed in the presbytery of Sairmeuse.

The recollection of Maurice was the only thing that marred his happiness. Why did he not give some sign of life?

"But if he had met with any misfortune we should have heard of it," thought the priest. "He has with him a brave man—an old soldier who would risk anything to come and tell us."

He was so absorbed in these thoughts that he did not observe that Madame d'Escorval was leaning more and more heavily upon his arm.

"I am ashamed to confess it," she said at last, "but I can go no farther. It has been so long since I was out of doors that I have almost forgotten how to walk."

"Fortunately we are almost there," replied the priest.

A moment after young Poignot stopped his cart in the road, at the entrance of the little foot-path leading to the Borderie.

"Our journey is ended!" he remarked

to the baron. Then he uttered a low whistle, like that which he had given a few hours before, to warn Marie-Anne of his arrival.

No one appeared; he whistled again, louder this time; then with all his might—still no response.

Madame d'Escorval and the abbe had now overtaken the cart.

"It is very strange that Marie-Anne does not hear me," remarked young Poignot, turning to them. "We cannot take the baron to the house until we have seen her. She knows that very well. Shall I run up and warn her?"

"She is asleep, perhaps," replied the abbe; "you stay with your horse, my boy, and I will go and wake her."

Certainly he did not feel the slightest disquietude. All was calm and still; a bright light was shining through the windows of the second story.

Still, when he saw the open door, a vague presentiment of evil stirred his heart.

"What can this mean?" he thought.

There was no light in the lower rooms, and the abbe was obliged to feel for the staircase with his hands.

At last he found it and went up. But upon the threshold of the chamber he paused, petrified with horror by the spectacle before him.

Poor Marie-Anne was lying on the floor. Her eyes, which were wide open, were covered with a white film; her black and swollen tongue was hanging from her mouth.

"Dead!" faltered the priest, "dead!"

But this could not be. The abbe conquered his weakness, and approaching the poor girl, he took her hand.

It was icy cold; the arm was rigid as iron.

"Poisoned!" he murmured; "poisoned with arsenic."

He rose to his feet, and cast a bewildered glance around the room. His eyes fell upon his medicine chest, open upon the table.

He rushed to it and unhesitatingly took out a vial, uncorked it, and inverted it on the palm of his hand—it was empty.

"I was not mistaken!" he exclaimed.

But he had no time to lose in conjectures.

The first thing to be done was to induce the baron to return to the farmhouse without telling him the terrible misfortune which had occurred.

To find a pretext was easy enough.

The priest hastened back to the wagon, and with well-affected calmness told the baron that it would be impossible for him to take up his abode at the Borderie at present, that several suspicious-looking characters had been seen prowling about, and that they must be more prudent than ever, now they could rely upon the kindly intervention of Martial de Sairmeuse.

At last, but not without considerable reluctance, the baron yielded.

"You desire it, cure," he sighed, "so I obey. Come, Poignot, my boy, take me back to your father's house."

Madame d'Escorval took a seat in the cart beside her husband; the priest watched them as they drove away, and not until the sound of their carriage wheels had died away in the distance did he venture to go back to the Borderie.

He was ascending the stairs when he heard moans that seemed to issue from the chamber of death. The sound sent all his blood wildly rushing to his heart. He darted up the staircase.

A man was kneeling beside Marie-Anne, weeping bitterly. The expression of his face, his attitude, his sobs betrayed the wildest despair. He was so lost in grief that he did not observe the abbe's entrance.

Who was this mourner who had found his way to the house of death?

After a moment, the priest divined who the intruder was, though he did not recognize him.

"Jean!" he cried, "Jean Lacheneur!"

With a bound the young man was on his feet, pale and menacing; a flame of anger drying the tears in his eyes.

"Who are you?" he demanded, in a terrible voice. "What are you doing here? What do you wish with me?"

By his peasant dress and by his long beard, the former cure of Sairmeuse was so effectually disguised that he was obliged to tell who he really was.

As soon as he uttered his name, Jean uttered a cry of joy.

"God has sent you here!" he exclaimed. "Marie-Anne cannot be dead! You, who have saved so many others, will save her."

As the priest sadly pointed to heaven, Jean paused, his face more ghastly than before. He understood now that there was no hope.

"Ah!" he murmured, with an accent of frightful despondency, "fate shows us no mercy. I have been watching over Marie-Anne, though from a distance; and this very evening I was coming to say to her: 'Beware, sister—be cautious!'"

"What! you knew——"

"I knew she was in great danger; yes, monsieur. An hour ago, while I was eating my supper in a restaurant at Sairmeuse, Grollet's son entered. 'Is this you, Jean?' said he. 'I just saw Chupin hiding near your sister's house; when he observed me he slunk away.' I ran here like one crazed. But when fate is against a man, what can he do? I came too late!"

The abbe reflected for a moment.

"Then you suppose that it was Chupin?"

"I do not suppose, sir; I *swear* that it was he—the miserable traitor!—who committed this foul deed."

"Still, what motive could he have had?"

Jean burst into one of those discordant laughs that are, perhaps, the most frightful signs of despair.

"You may rest assured that the blood of the daughter will yield him a richer reward than did the father's. Chupin has been the vile instrument; but it was not he who conceived the crime. You will have to seek higher for the culprit, much higher, in the finest chateau of the country, in the midst of an army of valets at Sairmeuse, in short!"

"Wretched man, what do you mean?"

"What I say."

And coldly, he added:

"Martial de Sairmeuse is the assassin."

The priest recoiled, really appalled by the looks and manner of the grief-stricken man.

"You are mad!" he said, severely.

But Jean gravely shook his head.

"If I seem so to you, sir," he replied, "it is only because you are ignorant of Martial's wild passion for Marie-Anne. He wished to make her his mistress. She had the audacity to refuse this honor; that was a crime for which she must be punished. When the Marquis de Sairmeuse became convinced that Lacheneur's daughter would never be his, he poisoned her that she might not belong to another.

Any attempt to convince Jean of the folly of his accusations would have been vain at that moment. No proofs would have convinced him. He would have closed his eyes to all evidence.

"To-morrow, when he is more calm, I will reason with him," thought the abbe; then, turning to Jean, he said:

"We cannot allow the body of the poor girl to remain here upon the floor. Assist me, and we will place it upon the bed."

Jean trembled from head to foot, and his hesitation was apparent.

"Very well!" he said, at last, after a severe struggle.

No one had ever slept upon this bed which poor Chanlouineau had destined for Marie-Anne.

"It shall be for her," he said to himself, "or for no one."

And it was Marie-Anne who rested there first—dead.

When this sad task was accomplished, he threw himself into the same arm chair in which Marie-Anne had breathed her last, and with his face buried in his hands, and his elbows supported upon his knees, he sat there as silent and motionless as the statues of sorrow placed above the last resting places of the dead.

The abbe knelt at the head of the bed and began the recital of the prayers for the dead, entreating God to grant peace and happiness in heaven to her who had suffered so much upon earth.

But he prayed only with his lips. In spite of his efforts, his mind would persist in wandering.

He was striving to solve the mystery that enshrouded Marie-Anne's death. Had she been murdered? Could it be that she had committed suicide?

This explanation recurred to him, but he could not believe it.

But, on the other hand, how could her death possibly be the result of crime?

He had carefully examined the room, and he had discovered nothing that betrayed the presence of a stranger.

All that he could prove was, that his vial of arsenic was empty, and that Marie-Anne had been poisoned by the *bouillon*, a few drops of which were left in the bowl that was standing upon the mantel.

"When daylight comes," thought the abbe, "I will look outside."

When morning broke, he went into the garden, and made a careful examination of the premises.

At first he saw nothing that gave him the least clew, and was about to abandon the investigations, when, upon entering the little grove, he saw in the distance a large dark stain upon the grass. He went nearer—it was blood!

Much excited, he summoned Jean, to inform him of the discovery.

"Some one has been assassinated here," said Lacheneur; "and it happened last night, for the blood has not had time to dry."

"The victim lost a great deal of blood," the priest remarked; "it might be possible to discover who he was by following up these stains."

"I am going to try," responded Jean. "Go back to the house, sir; I will soon return."

A child might have followed the track of the wounded man, the blood stains left in his passage were so frequent and so distinct.

These tell-tale marks stopped at Chupin's house. The door was closed; Jean rapped without the slightest hesitation.

The old poacher's eldest son opened the door, and Jean saw a strange spectacle.

The traitor's body had been thrown on the ground, in a corner of the room, the bed was overturned and broken, all the straw had been torn from the mattress, and the wife and sons of the dead man, armed with pickaxes and spades, were wildly overturning the beaten soil that formed the floor of the hovel. They were seeking the hidden treasures.

"What do you want?" demanded the widow, rudely.

"Father Chupin."

"You can see very plainly that he has boen murdered," replied one of the sons.

And brandishing his pick a few inches from Jean's head, he exclaimed:

"And you, perhaps, are the assassin. But that is for justice to determine. Now, decamp; if you do not——"

Had he listened to the promptings of anger, Jean Lacheneur would certainly have attempted to make the Chupins repent their menaces.

But a conflict was scarcely permissible under the circumstances.

He departed without a word, and hastened back to the Borderie.

The death of Chupin overturned all his plans, and greatly irritated him.

"I had sworn that the vile wretch who betrayed my father should perish by my hand," he murmured; "and now my vengeance has escaped me. Some one has robbed me of it."

Then he asked himself who the murderer could be.

"Is it possible that Martial assassinated Chupin after he murdered Marie-Anne? To kill an accomplice is an effectual way of assuring one's self of his silence."

He had reached the Borderie, and was about going up-stairs, when he thought he heard the sound of voices in the back room.

"That is strange," he said to himself. "Who can it be?"

And impelled by curiosity, he went and tapped upon the communicating door.

The abbe instantly made his appearance, hurriedly closing the door behind him. He was very pale, and visibly agitated.

"Who is it?" inquired Jean, eagerly.

"It is—it is. Guess who it is."

"How can I guess?"

"Maurice d'Escorval and Corporal Bavois."

"My God!"

"And it is a miracle that he has not been up-stairs."

"But whence does he come! Why have we received no news of him!"

"I do not know. He has been here only five minutes. Poor boy! after I told him that his father was safe, his first words were: 'And Marie-Anne?' He loves her more devotedly than ever. He comes with his heart full of her, confident and hopeful; and I tremble—I fear to tell him the truth."

"Oh terrible! terrible!"

"I have warned you; be prudent—and now, come in."

They entered the room together; and Maurice and the old soldier greeted Jean with the most ardent expressions of friendship.

They had not seen each other since the duel on the Reche, which had been interrupted by the arrival of the soldiers; and when they parted that day they scarcely expected to meet again.

"And now we are together once more," said Maurice, gayly, "and we have nothing to fear."

Never had the unfortunate man seemed so cheerful; and it was with the most jubilant air that he explained the reason of his long silence.

"Three days after we crossed the frontier," said he, "Corporal Bavois and I reached Turin. It was time, for we were tired out. We went to a small inn, and they gave us a room with two beds.

"That evening, while we were undressing, the corporal said to me: 'I am capable of sleeping two whole days without waking.' I, too, promised myself a rest of at least twelve hours. We reckoned without our host, as you will see.

"It was scarcely daybreak when we were awakened by a great tumult. A dozen rough-looking men entered our room, and ordered us, in Italian, to dress ourselves. They were too strong for us, so we obeyed; and an hour later we were in prison, confined in the same cell. Our reflections, I confess, were not *couleur de rose*.

"I well remember how the corporal said again and again, in that cool way of his: 'It will require four days to obtain our extradition, three days to take us back to Montaignac—that is seven days; it will take one day more to try me; so I have in all eight days to live.'"

"Upon my word! that was exactly what I thought," said the old soldier, approvingly.

"For five months," continued Maurice, "instead of saying 'good-night' to each other, we said: 'To-morrow they will come for us.' But they did not come.

"We were kindly treated. They did not take away my money; and they willingly sold us little luxuries; they also granted us two hours of exercise each day in the court-yard, and even loaned us books to read. In short, I should not have had any particular cause to complain, if I had been allowed to receive or to forward letters, or if I had been able to communicate with my father or with Marie-Anne. But we were in the secret cells, and were not allowed to have any intercourse with the other prisoners.

"At length our detention seemed so strange and became so insupportable to us, that we resolved to obtain some explanation of it, cost what it might.

"We changed our tactics. Up to that time we had been quiet and submissive; we suddenly became violent and intractable. We made the prison resound with our cries and protestations; we were continually sending for the superintendent; we claimed the intervention of the French ambassador. We were not obliged to wait long for the result.

"One fine afternoon, the superintendent released us, not without expressing much regret at being deprived of the society of such aimiable and charming guests.

"Our first act, as you may suppose, was to run to the ambassador. We did not see that dignitary, but his secretary received us. He knit his brows when I told my story, and became excessively grave. I remember each word of his reply.

" 'Monsieur,' said he, 'I can swear that the persecution of which you have been the object in France had nothing whatever to do with your detention here.'

"And as I expressed my astonishment:

" 'One moment,' he added. 'I shall express my opinion very frankly. One of your enemies—I leave you to discover which one—must exert a very powerful influence in Turin. You were in his way, perhaps: he had you imprisoned by the Piedmontese police.' "

With a heavy blow of his clenched fist, Jean Lacheneur made the table beside him reel.

"Ah! the secretary was right!" he exclaimed. "Maurice, it was Martial de Sairmeuse who caused your arrest——"

"Or the Marquis de Courtornieu," interrupted the abbe, with a warning glance at Jean.

A wrathful light gleamed for an instant in the eyes of Maurice; but it vanished almost immediately, and he shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"Nonsense," said he, "I do not wish to trouble myself any more about the past. My father is well again, that is the main thing. We can easily find some way of getting him safely across the frontier. Marie-Anne and I, by our devotion, will strive to make him forget that my rashness almost cost him his life. He is so good, so indulgent to the faults of others. We will take up our residence in Italy or in Switzerland. You will accompany us, Monsieur l'Abbe, and you also, Jean. As for you, corporal, it is decided that you belong to our family."

Nothing could be more horrible than to see this man, upon whose life such a terrible blight was about to fall, so bright and full of hope and confidence.

The impression produced upon Jean and the abbe was so terrible, that, in spite of their efforts, it showed itself in their faces; and Maurice remarked their agitation.

"What is the matter?" he inquired, in evident surprise.

They trembled, hung their heads, but did not say a word.

The unfortunate man's astonishment changed to a vague, inexpressible fear.

He enumerated all the misfortunes which could possibly have befallen him.

"What has happened?" he asked, in a stifled voice. "My father is safe, is he not? You said that my mother would desire nothing, if I were with her again. Is it Marie-Anne——"

He hesitated.

"Courage, Maurice," murmured the abbe. "Courage!"

The stricken man tottered as if about to fall; his face grew whiter than the plastered wall against which he leaned for support.

"Marie-Anne is dead!" he exclaimed.

Jean and the abbe were silent.

"Dead!" Maurice repeated—"and no secret voice warned me! Dead!—when?"

"She died only last night," replied Jean.

Maurice rose.

"Last night?" said he. "In that case, then, she is still here. Where?—upstairs?"

And without waiting for any response, he darted toward the staircase so quickly that neither Jean nor the abbe had time to intercept him.

With three bounds he reached the chamber; he walked straight to the bed, and with a firm hand turned back the sheet that hid the face of the dead.

He recoiled with a heart-broken cry.

Was this indeed the beautiful, the radiant Marie-Anne, whom he had loved to his own undoing! He did not recognize her.

He could not recognize these distorted features, this face swollen and discolored by poison, these eyes which were almost concealed by the purple swelling around them.

When Jean and the priest entered the room they found him standing with head thrown back, eyes dilated with terror, and rigid arm extended toward the corpse.

"Maurice," said the priest, gently, "be calm. Courage!"

He turned with an expression of complete bewilderment upon his features.

"Yes," he faltered, "that is what I need—courage!"

He staggered; they were obliged to support him to an arm-chair.

"Be a man," continued the priest; "where is your energy? To live, is to suffer."

He listened, but did not seem to comprehend.

"Live!" he murmured, "why should I desire to live since she is dead?"

The dread light of insanity glittered in his dry eyes. The abbe was alarmed.

"If he does not weep, he will lose his reason!" he thought.

And in an imperious voice, he said:

"You have no right to despair thus; you owe a sacred duty to your child."

The recollection which had given Marie-Anne strength to hold death at bay for a moment, saved Maurice from the dangerous torpor into which he was sinking.

He trembled as if he had received an electric shock, and springing from his chair:

"That is true," he cried. "Take me to my child."

"Not just now, Maurice; wait a little."

"Where is it? Tell me where it is."

"I cannot; I do not know."

An expression of unspeakable anguish stole over the face of Maurice, and in a husky voice he said:

"What! you do not know? Did she not confide in you?"

"No. I suspected her secret. I, alone——"

"You, alone! Then the child is dead, perhaps. Even if it is living, who can tell me where it is?"

"We shall undoubtedly find something that will give us a clew."

"You are right,'' faltered the wretched man. "When Marie-Anne knew that her life was in danger, she would not have forgotten her child. Those who cared for her in her last moments must have received some message for me. I wish to see those who watched over her. Who were they!"

The priest averted his face.

"I asked you who was with her when she died," repeated Maurice, in a sort of frenzy.

And, as the abbe remained silent, a terrible light dawned on the mind of the stricken man. He understood the cause of Marie-Anne's distorted features now.

"She perished the victim of a crime!" he exclaimed. "Some monster has killed her. If she died such a death, our child is lost forever! And it was I who recommended, who commanded the greatest precautions! Ah! it is a curse upon me!"

He sank back in his chair, overwhelmed with sorrow and remorse, and silent tears rolled slowly down his cheeks.

"He is saved!" thought the abbe, whose heart bled at the sight of such despair! Suddenly some one plucked him by the sleeve.

It was Jean Lacheneur, and he drew the priest into the embrasure of a window.

"What is this about a child?" he asked, harshly.

A flood of crimson suffused the brow of the priest.

"You have heard," he responded, laconically.

"Am I to understand that Marie-Anne was the mistress of Maurice, and that she had a child by him? Is this true? I will not—I cannot believe it! She, whom I revered as a saint! Did her pure forehead and her chaste looks lie? And he—Maurice—he whom I loved as a brother! So, his friendship was only a mask assumed to enable him to steal our honor!"

He hissed these words through his set teeth in such low tones that Maurice, absorbed in his agony of grief, did not overhear him.

"But how did she conceal her shame?" he continued. "No one suspected it—absolutely no one. And what has she done with her child? Appalled by a dread of disgrace, did she commit the crime committed by so many other ruined and forsaken women? Did she murder her own child?"

A hideous smile curved his thin lips.

"If the child is alive," he added, "I will find it, and Maurice shall be punished for his perfidy as he deserves."

He paused; the sound of horses' hoofs upon the road attracted his attention, and that of Abbe Midon.

They glanced out of the window and saw a horseman stop before the little foot-path, alight from his horse, throw the reins to his groom, and advance towards the Borderie.

At the sight of the visitor, Jean Lacheneur uttered the frightful howl of an infuriated wild beast.

"The Marquis de Sairmeuse here!" he exclaimed.

He sprang to Maurice, and shaking him violently, he cried:

"Up! here is Martial, Marie-Anne's murderer! Up! he is coming! he is at our mercy!"

Maurice sprang up in a fury of passion, but the abbe darted to the door and intercepted the infuriated men as they were about to leave the room.

"Not a word, young men, not a threat!" he said, imperiously. "I forbid it. At least respect the dead who is lying here!"

There was such an irresistible authority in his words and glance, that Jean and Maurice stood as if turned to stone.

Before the priest had time to say more. Martial was there.

He did not cross the threshold. With a glance he took in the whole scene; he turned very pale, but not a gesture, not a word escaped his lips.

Wonderful as was his accustomed control over himself, he could not articulate a syllable; and it was only by pointing to the bed upon which Marie-Anne's lifeless form was reposing, that he asked an explanation.

"She was infamously poisoned last evening," replied the abbe, sadly.

Maurice forgetting the priest's commands stepped forward.

"She was alone and defenseless. I have been at liberty only two days. But I know the name of the man who had me arrested in Turin, and thrown into prison. They told me the coward's name!"

Instinctively Martial recoiled.

"It was you, infamous wretch!" ex-

claimed Maurice. "You confess your guilt, scoundrel?"

Once again the abbe interposed; he threw himself between the rivals, persuaded that Martial was about to attack Maurice.

But no; the Marquis de Sairmeuse had resumed the haughty and indifferent manner which was habitual to him. He took from his pocket a bulky envelope, and throwing it upon the table:

"Here," he said coldly, "is what I was bringing to Mlle. Lacheneur. It contains first a safe conduct from his majesty for M. d'Escorval. From this moment, he is at liberty to leave Poignot's farm-house and return to Escorval. He is free, he is saved, he is granted a new trial, and there can be no doubt of his acquittal. Here is also a decree of his non-complicity rendered in favor of Abbe Midon, and an order from the bishop which reinstates him as Cure of Sairmeuse; and lastly a discharge, drawn up in due form. and an acknowledged right to a pension in the name of Corporal Bavois."

He paused, and as his astonished hearers stood rooted to their places with wonder, he turned and approached Marie-Anne's bedside.

With hand uplifted to heaven over the lifeless form of her whom he had loved, and in a voice that would have made the murderess tremble in her innermost soul, he said, solemnly:

"To you, Marie-Anne, I swear that I will avenge you!"

For a few seconds he stood motionless, then suddenly, he stooped. pressed a kiss upon the dead girl's brow, and left the room.

"And you think that man can be guilty!" exclaimed the abbe. "You see, Jean, that you are mad!"

"And this last insult to my dead sister is an honor, I suppose," said Jean, with a furious gesture.

"And the wretch binds my hands by saving my father!" exclaimed Maurice.

From his place by the window, the Abbe saw Martial remount his horse.

But the marquis did not take the road to Montaignac. It was towards the Chateau de Courtornieu that he hastened.

CHAPTER XCI.

THE reason of Madame Blanche had sustained a frightful shock, when Chupin was obliged to lift her and carry her from Marie-Anne's chamber.

But she lost consciousness entirely when she saw the old poacher stricken down by her side.

On and after that night Aunt Medea took her revenge for all the slights she had received.

Scarcely tolerated until then, at Courtornieu, she henceforth made herself respected, and even feared.

She, who usually swooned if a kitten hurt itself, did not utter a cry. Her extreme fear gave her the courage that not unfrequently animates cowards when they are in some dire extremity.

She seized the arm of her bewildered niece, and, by dint of dragging and pushing, had her back at the chateau in much less time than it had taken them to go to the Borderie.

It was half-past one o'clock when they reached the little garden-gate, by which they had left the grounds.

No one in the chateau was aware of their long absence.

This was due to several different circumstances. First, to the precautions taken by Blanche, who had given orders, before going out, that no one should come to her room, on any pretext whatever, unless she rang.

It also chanced to be the birthday of the marquis's valet de chambre. The servants had dined more sumptuously than usual. They had toasts and songs over their dessert; and at the conclusion of the repast, they amused themselves by an extempore ball.

They were still dancing at half-past one; all the doors were open, and the two ladies succeeded in gaining the chamber of Blanche without being observed.

When the doors of the apartment had been securely closed, and when there was no longer any fear of listeners, Aunt Medea attacked her niece.

"Now will you explain what happened at the Borderie; and what you were doing there?" she inquired.

Blanche shuddered.

"Why do you wish to know?" she asked.

"Because I suffered agony during the three hours that I spent in waiting for you. What was the meaning of those despairing cries that I heard? Why did you call for aid? I heard a death-rattle that made my hair stand on end with terror. Why was it necessary for Chupin to bring you out in his arms?"

Aunt Medea would have packed her trunks, perhaps, that very evening, had she seen the glance which her niece bestowed upon her.

Blanche longed for power to annihilate this relative—this witness who might ruin her by a word, but whom she would ever have beside her, a living reproach for her crime.

"You do not answer me," insisted Aunt Medea.

Blanche was trying to decide whether it would be better for her to reveal the truth, horrible as it was, or to invent some plausible explanation.

To confess all! It would be intolerable. She would place herself, body and soul, in Aunt Medea's power.

But, on the other hand, if she deceived her, was it not more than probable that her aunt would betray her by some involuntary exclamation when she heard of the crime which had been committed at the Borderie?

"For she is so stupid!" thought Blanche.

She felt that it would be the wisest plan, under such circumstances, to be perfectly frank, to teach her relative her lesson, and to imbue her with some of her own firmness.

Having come to this conclusion, she disdained all concealment.

"Ah, well!" she said, "I was jealous of Marie-Anne. I thought she was Martial's mistress. I was half crazed, and I killed her."

She expected despairing cries, or a fainting fit; nothing of the kind. Stupid though Aunt Medea was, she had divined the truth before she interrogated her niece. Besides, the insults she had received for years had extinguished every generous sentiment, dried up the springs of emotion, and destroyed every particle of moral sensibility she had ever possessed.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "it is terrible! What if it should be discovered!"

Then she shed a few tears, but not more than she had often wept for some trifle.

Blanche breathed more freely. Surely she could count upon the silence and absolute submission of her dependent relative. Convinced of this, she began to recount all the details of the frightful drama which had been enacted at the Borderie.

She yielded to a desire which was stronger than her own will; to the wild longing that sometimes unbinds the tongue of the worst criminals, and forces them—irresistibly impels them to talk of their crimes, even when they distrust their confidant.

But when she came to the proofs which had convinced her of her lamentable mistake, she suddenly paused in dismay.

That certificate of marriage signed by the Cure of Vigano: what had she done with it? where was it? She remembered holding it in her hands.

She sprang up, examined the pocket of her dress and uttered a cry of joy. She had it safe. She threw it into a drawer, and turned the key.

Aunt Medea wished to retire to her own room, but Blanche entreated her to remain. She was unwilling to be left alone—she dared not—she was afraid.

And as if she desired to silence the inward voice that tormented her, she talked with extreme volubility, repeating again and again that she was ready to do anything in expiation of her crime, and that she would brave impossibilities to recover Marie-Anne's child.

And certainly, the task was both difficult and dangerous.

If she sought the child openly, it would be equivalent to a confession of guilt. She would be compelled to act secretly, and with great caution.

"But I shall succeed," she said. "I will spare no expense."

And remembering her vow, and the threats of her dying victim, she added:

"I must succeed. I have sworn—and I was forgiven under those conditions."

Astonishment dried the ever ready tears of Aunt Medea.

That her niece, with her dreadful crime still fresh in her mind, could coolly reason, deliberate, and make plans for the future, seemed to her incomprehensible.

"What an iron will!" she thought.

But in her bewilderment she quite overlooked something that would have enlightened any ordinary observer.

Blanche was seated upon her bed, her hair was unbound, her eyes were glittering with delirium, and her incoherent words and her excited gestures betrayed the frightful anxiety that was torturing her.

And she talked and talked, exclaiming, questioning Aunt Medea, and forcing her to reply, only that she might escape from her own thoughts.

Morning had dawned some time before, and the servants were heard bustling about the chateau, and Blanche, oblivious to all around her, was still explaining how she could, in less than a year, restore Marie-Anne's child to Maurice d'Escorval.

She paused abruptly in the middle of a sentence.

Instinct had suddenly warned her of the danger she incurred in making the slightest change in her habits.

She sent Aunt Medea away, then, at the usual hour, rang for her maid.

It was nearly eleven o'clock, and she was just completing her toilette, when the ringing of the bell announced a visitor.

Almost immediately a maid appeared, evidently in a state of great excitement.

"What is it?" inquired Blanche, eagerly. "Who has come?"

"Ah, madame—that is, mademoiselle, if you only knew——"

"*Will* you speak?"

"The Marquis de Sairmeuse is below, in the blue drawing-room; and he begs mademoiselle to grant him a few moments' conversation."

Had a thunderbolt riven the earth at the feet of the murderess, she could not have been more terrified.

"All must have been discovered!" this was her first thought. That alone would have brought Martial there.

She almost decided to reply that she was not at home, or that she was extremely ill; but reason told her that she was alarming herself needlessly, perhaps, and that, in any case, the worst was preferable to suspense.

"Tell the marquis that I will be there in a moment," she replied.

She desired a few minutes of solitude to compose her features, to regain her self-possession, if possible, and to conquer the nervous trembling that made her shake like a leaf.

But just as she was most disquieted by the thought of her peril, a sudden inspiration brought a malicious smile to her lip.

"Ah!" she thought, "my agitation will seem perfectly natural. It may even be made of service."

As she descended the grand staircase, she could not help saying to herself:

"Martial's presence here is incomprehensible."

It was certainly very extraordinary; and it had not been without much hesitation that he resolved upon this painful step.

But it was the only means of procuring several important documents which were indispensable in the revision of M. d'Escorval's case.

These documents, after the baron's condemnation, had been left in the hands of the Marquis de Courtornieu. Now that he had lost his reason, it was impossible to ask him for them; and Martial was obliged to apply to the daughter for permission to search for them among her father's papers.

This was why Martial said to himself that morning:

"I will carry the baron's safe-conduct to Marie-Anne, and then I will push on to Courtornieu."

He arrived at the Borderie gay and confident, his heart full of hope. Alas! Marie-Anne was dead.

No one would ever know what a terrible blow it had been to Martial; and his conscience told him that he was not free from blame; that he had, at least, rendered the execution of the crime an easy matter.

For it was indeed he who, by abusing his influence, had caused the arrest of Maurice at Turin.

But though he was capable of the basest perfidy when his love was at stake, he was incapable of virulent animosity.

Marie-Anne was dead; he had it in his power to revoke the benefits he had conferred, but the thought of doing so never once occurred to him. And when Jean and Maurice insulted him, he revenged himself only by overwhelming them by his magnanimity. When he left the Borderie, pale as a ghost, his lips still cold from the kiss pressed on the brow of the dead, he said to himself:

"For her sake, I will go to Courtornieu. In memory of her, the baron must be saved."

By the expression on the faces of the valets when he dismounted in the court-yard of the chateau and asked to see Mme. Blanche, the marquis was again reminded of the profound sensation which this unexpected visit would produce. But, what did it matter to him? He was passing through one of those crises in which the mind can conceive of no further misfortune, and is therefore indifferent to everything.

Still he trembled when they ushered him into the blue drawing-room. He remembered the room well. It was here that Blanche had been wont to receive him in days gone by, when his fancy was vascillating between her and Marie-Anne.

How many pleasant hours they had passed together here! He seemed to see Blanche again, as she was then, radiant with youth, gay and laughing. Her naivete was affected, perhaps, but was it any the less charming on that account?

At this very moment Blanche entered the room. She looked so careworn and sad that he scarcely knew her. His heart was touched by the look of patient sorrow imprinted upon her features.

"How much you must have suffered, Blanche," he murmured, scarcely knowing what he said.

It cost her an effort to repress her secret joy. She saw that he knew nothing of her crime. She noticed his emotion, and saw the profit she could derive from it.

"I can never cease to regret having displeased you," she replied, humbly and sadly. "I shall never be consoled."

She had touched the vulnerable spot in every man's heart.

For there is no man so skeptical, so cold, or so *blase* that his vanity is not pleased with the thought that a woman is dying for his sake.

There is no man who is not moved by this most delicious flattery, and who is not ready and willing to give, at least, a tender pity in exchange for such devotion.

"Is it possible that you could forgive me?" stammered Martial.

The wily enchantress averted her face as if to prevent him from reading in her eyes a weakness of which she was ashamed. It was the most eloquent of replies.

But Martial said no more on this subject. He made known his petition, which was granted; then fearing, perhaps, to promise too much, he said:

"Since you do not forbid it, Blanche, I

will return—to-morrow—another day."

As he rode back to Montaignac, Martial's thoughts were busy.

"She really loves me," he thought; "that pallor, that weakness could not be feigned. Poor girl! she is my wife, after all. The reasons that influenced me in my rupture with her father exist no longer, and the Marquis de Courtornieu may be regarded as dead."

All the inhabitants of Sairmeuse were congregated on the public square when Martial passed through the village. They had just heard of the murder at the Borderie, and the abbe was now closeted with the justice of the peace, relating the circumstances of the poisoning.

After a prolonged inquest the following verdict was rendered: "That a man known as Chupin, a notoriously bad character, had entered the house of Marie-Anne Lacheneur, and taken advantage of her absence to mingle poison with her food."

The report added that: "Said Chupin had been himself assassinated, soon after his crime, by a certain Balstain, whose whereabouts were unknown."

But this affair interested the community much less than the visits which Martial was paying to Madame Blanche.

It was soon rumored that the Marquis and the Marquise de Sairmeuse were reconciled, and in a few weeks they left for Paris with the intention of residing there permanently. A few days after their departure, the eldest of the Chupins announced his determination of taking up his abode in the same great city.

Some of his friends endeavored to dissuade him, assuring him that he would certainly die of starvation.

"Nonsense!" he replied, with singular assurance; "I, on the contrary, have an idea that I shall not want for anything there."

CHAPTER XCII.

TIME gradually heals all wounds, and in less than a year it was difficult to discern any trace of the fierce whirlwind of passion which had devastated the peaceful valley of the Oiselle.

What remained to attest the reality of all these events, which, though they were so recent, had already been relegated to the domain of the legendary?

A charred ruin on the Reche.

A grave in the cemetery, upon which was inscribed:

"MARIE-ANNE LACHENEUR, DIED AT THE AGE OF TWENTY. PRAY FOR HER!"

Only a few, the oldest men and the politicians of the village, forgot their solicitude in regard to the crops to remember this episode.

Sometimes, during the long winter evenings, when they had gathered at the Boeuf Couronne, they laid down their greasy cards and gravely discussed the events of the past years.

They never failed to remark that almost all the actors in that bloody drama at Montaignac had, in common parlance, "come to a bad end."

Victors and vanquished seemed to be pursued by the same inexorable fatality.

Look at the names already upon the fatal list!

Lacheneur, beheaded.

Chanlouineau, shot.

Marie-Anne, poisoned.

Chupin, the traitor, assassinated.

The Marquis de Courtornieu lived, or rather survived, but death would have seemed a mercy in comparison with such total annihilation of intelligence. He had fallen below the level of the brute, which is, at least, endowed with instinct. Since the departure of his daughter he had been cared for by two servants, who did not allow him to give them much trouble, and when they desired to go out they shut him up, not in his chamber, but in the cellar, to prevent his ravings and shrieks from being heard from without.

If people supposed for awhile that the Sairmeuse would escape the fate of the others, they were mistaken. It was not long before the curse fell upon them.

One fine morning in the month of December, the duke left the chateau to take part in a wolf-hunt in the neighborhood.

At nightfall, his horse returned, panting, covered with foam, and riderless.

What had become of its master?

A search was instituted at once, and all night long twenty men, bearing torches, wandered through the woods, shouting and calling at the top of their voices.

Five days went by, and the search for the missing man was almost abandoned, when a shepherd lad, pale with fear, came to the chateau one morning to tell them that he had discovered, at the base of a precipice, the bloody and mangled body of the Duke de Sairmeuse.

It seemed strange that such an excellent rider should have met with such a fate. There might have been some doubt as to its being an accident, had it not been for the explanation given by the grooms."

"The duke was riding an exceedingly vicious beast," said these men. "She was always taking fright and shying at everything."

The following week Jean Lacheneur left the neighborhood.

The conduct of this singular man had caused much comment. When Marie-

Anne died, he at first refused his inheritance.

"I wish nothing that came to her through Chanlouineau," he said everywhere, thus calumniating the memory of his sister as he had calumniated her when alive.

Then, after a short absence, and without any apparent reason, he suddenly changed his mind.

He not only accepted the property, but made all possible haste to obtain possession of it. He made many excuses; and, if one might believe him, he was not acting in his own interest, but merely conforming to the wishes of his deceased sister; and he declared that not a penny would go into his pockets.

This much is certain, as soon as he obtained legal possession of the estate, he sold all the property, troubling himself but little in regard to the price he received, provided the purchasers paid cash.

He reserved only the furniture of the sumptuously adorned chamber at the Borderie. These articles he burned.

This strange act was the talk of the neighborhood.

"The poor young man has lost his reason!" was the almost universal opinion.

And those who doubted it, doubted it no longer when it became known that Jean Lacheneur had formed an engagement with a company of strolling players who stopped at Montaignac for a few days.

But the young man had not wanted for good advice and kind friends. M. d'Escorval and the abbe had exerted all their eloquence to induce him to return to Paris, and complete his studies; but in vain.

The necessity for concealment no longer existed, either in the case of the baron or the priest.

Thanks to Martial de Sairmeuse they were now installed, the one in the presbytery, the other at Escorval, as in days gone by.

Acquitted at his new trial, restored to the possession of his property, reminded of his frightful fall only by a very slight lameness, the baron would have deemed himself a fortunate man, had it not been for his great anxiety on his son's account.

Poor Maurice! his heart was broken by the sound of the clods of earth falling upon Marie-Anne's coffin; and his very life now seemed dependent upon the hope of finding his child.

Assured of the powerful assistance of Abbe Midon, he had confessed all to his father, and confided his secret to Corporal Bavois, who was an honored guest at Escorval; and these devoted friends had promised him all possible aid.

The task was very difficult, however, and certain resolutions on the part of Maurice greatly diminished the chance of success.

Unlike Jean, he was determined to guard religiously the honor of the dead; and he had made his friends promise that Marie-Anne's name should not be mentioned in prosecuting the search.

"We shall succeed all the same," said the abbe, kindly; "with time and patience any mystery can be solved."

He divided the department into a certain number of districts; then one of the little band went each day from house to house questioning the inmates, but not without extreme caution, for fear of arousing suspicion, for a peasant becomes intractable at once if his suspicions are aroused.

But the weeks went by, and the quest was fruitless. Maurice was deeply discouraged.

"My child died on coming into the world," he said, again and again.

But the abbe reassured him.

"I am morally certain that such was not the case," he replied. "I know, by Marie-Anne's absence, the date of her child's birth. I saw her after her recovery; she was comparatively gay and smiling. Draw your own conclusions."

"And yet there is not a nook or corner for miles around which we have not explored."

"True; but we must extend the circle of our investigations."

The priest, now, was only striving to gain time, knowing full well that it is the sovereign balm for all sorrows.

His confidence, which had been very great at first, had been sensibly diminished by the responses of an old woman, who passed for one of the greatest gossips in the community.

Adroitly interrogated, the worthy dame replied that she knew nothing of such a child, but that there must be one in the neighborhood, since it was the third time she had been questioned on the subject.

Intense as was his surprise, the abbe succeeded in hiding it.

He set the old gossip to talking, and after a two hours' conversation, he arrived at the conclusion that two persons beside Maurice were searching for Marie-Anne's child.

Why, with what aim, and who these persons could be, the abbe was unable to ascertain.

"Ah! rascals have their uses after all," he thought. "If we only had a man like Chupin to set upon the track!"

But the old poacher was dead, and his eldest son—the one who knew Blanche de Courtornieu's secret—was in Paris.

Only the widow and the second son remained in Sairmeuse.

They had not, as yet, succeeded in discovering the twenty thousand francs,

but the fever for gold was burning in their veins, and they persisted in their search. From morning until night the mother and son toiled on, until the earth around their hut had been explored to the depth of six feet.

A word dropped by a peasant one day put an end to these researches.

"Really, my boy," he said, addressing young Chupin, "I did not suppose you were such a fool as to persist in hunting birds' nests after the birds have flown. Your brother, who is in Paris, can undoubtedly tell you where the treasure was concealed."

The younger Chupin uttered the fierce roar of a wild beast.

"Holy Virgin! you are right!" he exclaimed. "Wait until I get money enough to take me to Paris, and we will see."

CHAPTER XCIII.

MARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE'S unexpected visit to the Chateau de Courtornieu had alarmed Aunt Medea even more than Blanche.

In ten seconds, more ideas passed through her brain than had visited it for ten years.

She saw the gendarmes at the chateau; she saw her niece arrested, incarcerated in the Montaignac prison, and brought before the Court of Assizes.

If this were all she had to fear! But suppose she, too, were compromised, suspected of complicity, dragged before the judge, and even accused of being the sole culprit!

Finding the suspense intolerable, she left her room; and, stealing on tiptoe to the great drawing-room, she applied her ear to the door of the little blue *salon*, in which Blanche and Martial were seated.

The conversation which she heard convinced her that her fears were groundless.

She drew a long breath, as if a mighty burden had been lifted from her breast. But a new idea, which was to grow, flourish, and bear fruit, had just taken root in her brain.

When Martial left the room, Aunt Medea at once opened the communicating door and entered the blue *salon*, thus avowing that she had been a listener.

Twenty-four hours earlier she would not have dreamed of committtng such an enormity.

"Well, Blanche, we were frightened at nothing," she exclaimed.

Blanche did not reply.

She was deliberating, forcing herself to weigh the probable consequences of all these events which had succeeded each other with such marvelous rapidity.

"Perhaps the hour of my revenge is almost here," murmured Blanche, as if communing with herself.

"What do you say?" inquired Aunt Meda, with evident curiosity.

"I say, aunt, that in less than a month I shall be Marquise de Sairmeuse in reality as well as in name. My husband will return to me, and then—oh! then."

"God grant it!" said Aunt Medea, hypocritically.

In her secret heart she had but little faith in this prediction, and whether it was realized or not mattered little to her.

"Still another proof that your jealousy led you astray; and that—that what you did at the Borderie was unnecessary;" she said, in that low tone that accomplices always use in speaking of their crime.

Such had been the opinion of Blanche; but she now shook her head, and g oomily replied:

"You are wrong; that which took place at the Borderie has restored my husband to me. I understand it all, now. It is true that Marie-Anne was not Martial's mistress; but Martial loved her. He loved her, and the rebuffs which he received only increased his passion. It was for her sake that he abandoned me; and never, while she lived, would he have thought of me. His emotion on seeing me was the remnant of the emotion which had been awakened by another. His tenderness was only the expression of his sorrow. Whatever happens, I shall have only her leavings—what she has disdained!" the young marquise added bitterly; and her eyes flashed, and she stamped her foot in ungovernable anger. And shall I regret what I have done!" she exclaimed; "never!—no never."

From that moment, she was herself again, brave and determined.

But horrible fears assailed her when the inquest began.

Officials came from Montaignac charged with investigating the affair. They examined a host of witnesses, and there was even talk of sending to Paris for one of those detectives skilled in unravelling all the mysteries of crime.

Aunt Medea was half crazed with terror; and her fear was so apparent that it caused Blanche great anxiety.

"You will end by betraying us," she remarked, one evening.

"Ah! my terror is beyond my control."

"If that is the case, do not leave your room."

"It would be more prudent, certainly."

"You can say that you are not well; your meals shall be served in your own apartment."

Aunt Medea's face brightened. In her inmost heart, she was enraptured. To have her meals served in her own room, in her bed in the morning, and on a little table by the fire in the evening, had long

been the ambition and the dream of the poor dependent. But how to accomplish it! Two or three times, being a trifle indisposed, she had ventured to ask if her breakfast might be brought to her room, but her request had been harshly refused.

"If Aunt Medea is hungry, she will come down and take her place at the table as usual," had been the response of Madame Blanche.

To be treated in this way in a chateau were there were a dozen servants standing about idle, was hard indeed.

But now——

Every morning, in obediance to a formal order from Blanche, the cook came up to receive Aunt Medea's commands; she was permitted to dictate the bill of fare each day, and to order the dishes that she preferred.

These new joys awakened many strange thoughts in her mind, and dissipated much of the regret which she had felt for the crime at the Borderie.

The inquest was the subject of all her conversation with her niece. They had all the latest information in regard to the facts developed by the investigation through the butler, who took a great interest in such matters, and who had won the good will of the agents from Montaignac, by making them familiar with the contents of his wine cellar.

Through him, Blanche and her aunt learned that suspicion pointed to the deceased Chupin. Had he not been seen prowling around the Borderie on the very evening that the crime was committed? The testimony of the young peasant who had warned Jean Lacheneur seemed decisive.

The motive was evident, at least, every one thought so. Twenty persons had heard Chupin declare, with frightful oaths, that he should never be tranquil in mind while a Lacheneur was left upon earth.

So that which might have ruined Blanche, saved her; and the death of the old poacher seemed really providential.

Why should she suspect that Chupin had revealed her secret before his death?

When the butler told her that the judges and the police agents had returned to Montaignac, she had great difficulty in concealing her joy.

"There is no longer anything to fear," she said to Aunt Medea.

She had, indeed, escaped the justice of man. There remained the justice of God.

A few weeks before, this thought of "the justice of God," might, perhaps, have brought a smile to the lips of Madame Blanche.

She then regarded it as an imaginary evil, designed to hold timorous spirits in check.

On the morning that followed her crime, she almost shrugged her shoulders at the thought of Marie-Anne's dying threats.

She remembered her promise; but she did not intend to fulfill it.

She had considered the matter, and she saw the terrible risk to which she exposed herself if she endeavored to find the missing child.

"The father will be sure to discover it," she thought.

But she was to realize the power of her victim's threats that same evening.

Overcome with fatigue, she retired to her room at an early hour, and instead of reading, as she was accustomed to do before retiring, she extinguished her candle as soon as she had undressed, saying:

"I must sleep."

But sleep had fled. Her crime was ever in her thoughts; it rose before her in all its horror and atrocity. She knew that she was lying upon her bed, at Courtornieu; and yet it seemed as if she was there in Chanlouineau's house, pouring out poison, then watching its effects, concealed in the dressing-room.

She was struggling against these thoughts; she was exerting all her strength of will to drive away these terrible memories, when she thought she heard the key turn in the lock. She lifted her head from the pillow with a start.

Then, by the uncertain light of her night-lamp, she thought she saw the door open slowly and noiselessly. Marie-Anne entered — gliding in like a phantom. She seated herself in an armchair near the bed. Great tears were rolling down her cheeks, and she looked sadly, yet threateningly around her.

The murderess hid her face under the bed-covers; and her whole body was bathed in an icy perspiration. For her, this was not a mere apparition—it was a frightful reality.

But her's was not a nature to submit unresistingly to such an impression. She shook off the stupor that was creeping over her, and tried to reason with herself aloud, as if the sound of her voice would reassure her.

"I am dreaming!" she said. "Do the dead return to life? Am I childish enough to be frightened by phantoms born of my own imaginations?"

She said this, but the phantom did not disappear.

She shut her eyes, but still she saw it through her closed eyelids—through the coverings which she had drawn up over her head, she saw it still.

Not until daybreak did Madame Blanche fall asleep.

And it was the same the next night, and the night following that, and always and always; and the terrors of each night were augmented by the terrors of the nights which had preceded it.

During the day, in the bright sunshine,

she regained her courage, and became skeptical again. Then she railed at herself.

"To be afraid of something that does not exist, is folly!" she said, vehemently. "To-night I will conquer my absurd weakness."

But when evening came all her brave resolution vanished, and the same fear seized her when night appeared with its *cortege* of spectres.

It is true that Madame Blanche attributed her tortures at night to the disquietude she suffered during the day.

For the officials were at Sairmeuse, then, and she trembled. A mere nothing might divert suspicion from Chupin and direct it towards her. What if some peasant had seen her with Chupin? What if some trifling circumstance should furnish a clue which would lead straight to Courtornieu.

"When the investigation is over, I shall forget," she thought.

It ended, but she did not forget.

Darwin has said.

"It is when their safety is assured that great criminals rea ly feel remorse."

Madame Blanche might have vouched for the truth of this assertion, made by the most profound thinker and closest observer of the age.

And yet, the agony she was enduring did not make her abandon, for a single moment, the plan she had conceived on the day of Martial's visit.

She played her part so well, that deeply moved, almost repentant, he returned five or six times, and at last, one day, he besought her to allow him to remain.

But even the joy of this triumph did not restore her peace of mind.

Between her and her husband rose that dread apparition; and Marie-Anne's distorted features were ever before her. She knew only too well that this heart-broken man had no love to give her, and that she would never have the slighest influence over him. And to crown all, to her already intolerable sufferings was added another, more poignant than all the rest.

Speaking one evening of Marie-Anne's death, Martial forgot himself, and spoke of his oath of vengeance. He deeply regretted that Chupin was dead, he remarked, for he should have experienced an intense delight in making the wretch who murdered her *die* a lingering death in the midst of the most frightful tortures.

He spoke with extreme violence and in a voice vibrant with his still powerful passion.

And Blanche, in terror, asked herself what would be her fate if her husband ever discovered that she was the culprit—and he might discover it.

She now began to regret that she had not kept the promise she had made to her victim; and she resolved to commence the search for Marie-Anne's child.

To do this effectually it was necessary for her to be in a large city—Paris, for example—where she could procure discreet and skillful ag nts.

It was necessary to persuade Martial to remove to the capital. Aided by the Duke de Sairmeuse, she did not find this a very difficult task; and one morning, Madame Blanche, with a radiant face, announced to Aunt Medea:

"Aunt, we leave just one week from to-day."

CHAPTER XCIV.

BESET by a thousand fears and anxieties, Blanche had failed to notice that Aunt Medea was no longer the same.

The change, it is true, had been gradual; it had not struck the servants, but it was none the less positive and real, and it betrayed itself in numberless trifles.

For example, though the poor dependent still retained her humble, resigned manner, she had lost, little by little, the servile fear that had showed itself in her every movement. She no longer trembled when any one addressed her, and there was occasionally a ring of independence in her voice.

If visitors were present, she no longer kept herself modestly in the background, but drew forward her chair and took part in the conversation. At table, she allowed her preferences and her dislikes to appear. On two or three occasions she had ventured to differ from her niece in opinion, and had even been so bold as to question the propriety of some of her orders.

Once, Madame Blanche, on going out, asked Aunt Medea to accompany her; but the latter declared she had a cold, and remained at home.

And, on the following Sunday, although Blanche did not wish to attend vespers, Aunt Medea declared her intention of going; and as it rained, she requested the coachman to harness the horses to the carriage, which was done.

All this was nothing, in appearance; in reality, it was monstrous, amazing. It was quite plain that the humble relative was becoming bold, even audacious in her demands.

As this departure, which her niece had just announced so gayly, had never been discussed before her, she was greatly surprised.

"What! you are going away," she repeated; "you are leaving Courtornieu?"

"And without regret."

"To go where, pray?"

"To Paris. We shall reside there; that is decided. That is the place for my husband. His name, his fortune, his talents, the favor of the king, assure him a high position there. He will re-purchase the Hotel de Sairmeuse, and furnish it magnificently. We shall have a princely establishment."

All the torments of envy were visible upon Aunt Medea's countenance.

"And what is to become of me?" she asked, in plaintive tones.

"You—aunt! You will remain here; you will be mistress of the chateau. A trustworthy person must remain to watch over my poor father. You will be happy and contented here, I hope."

But no; Aunt Medea did not seem satisfied.

"I shall never have courage to stay all alone in this great chateau," she whined.

"You foolish woman! will you not have the servants, the gardeners, and the concierge to protect you?"

"That makes no difference. I am afraid of insane people. When the marquis began to rave and howl this evening, I felt as if I should go mad myself."

Blanche shrugged her shoulders.

"What *do* you wish, then?" she asked, in a still more sarcastic manner.

"I thought—I wondered—if you would not take me with you."

"To Paris! You are crazy, I do believe. What would you do there?"

"Blanche, I entreat you, I beseech you, to do so!"

"Impossible, aunt, impossible!"

Aunt Medea seemed to be in despair.

"And what if I should tell you that I cannot remain here—that I dare not—that I should die!"

A flush of impatience dyed the cheek of Madame Blanche.

"You weary me beyond endurance," she said, rudely.

And with a gesture that increased the harshness of her words, she added:

"If Courtornieu displeases you so much, there is nothing to prevent you from seeking a home more to your taste. You are free and of age."

"Aunt Medea turned very pale, and she bit her lips until the blood came.

"That is to say," she said, at last, "you permit me to take my choice between dying of fear at Courtornieu and ending my days in a hospital. Thanks, my niece, thanks. That is like you. I expected nothing less of you. Thanks!"

She raised her head, and a dangerous light gleamed in her eyes. There was the hiss of a serpent in the voice in which she continued:

"Very well! this decides me. I entreated you, and you brutally refused to heed my prayer, now I command and I say: 'I will go!' Yes, I intend to go with you to Paris—and I shall go. Ah! it surprises you to hear poor, meek, much-abused Aunt Medea sp ak in this way. I have endured in silence for a long time, but I have rebelled at last. My life in this house has been a hell. It is true that you have given me shelter—that you have fed and lodged me; but you have taken my entire life in exchange. What servant ever endured what I have endured? Have you ever treated one of your maids as you have treated me—your own flesh and blood? And I have had no wages; on the contrary, I was expected to be grateful since I lived by your tolerance. Ah! you have made me pay dearly for the crime of being poor. How you have insulted me—humiliated me—trampled me under foot!"

She paused.

The bitter rancor which had been accumulating for years fairly choked her; but after a moment, she resumed in a tone of intense irony:

"You ask me what *I* would do in Paris? I, too, would enjoy myself. What will you do, yourself? You will go to court, to balls, and to the play—will you not? Very well, I will accompany you. I will attend these *fetes*. I will have handsome toilettes, I—poor Aunt Medea—who have never seen myself in anything but shabby black woolen dresses. Have you ever thought of giving me the pleasure of possessing a handsome dress? Yes, twice a year, perhaps, you have given me a black silk, recommending me to take good care of it. But it was not for my sake that you went to this expense. It was for your own sake, and in order that your poor relation should do honor to your generosity. You dressed me in it, as you sew gold lace upon the clothing of your lackeys, through vanity. And I endured all this; I made myself insignificant and humble; buffeted upon one cheek, I offered the other. I must live—I must have food. And you, Blanche, how often, to make me subservient to your will, have you said to me: 'You will do thus-and-so, if you desire to remain at Courtornieu?' And I obeyed—I was forced to obey, since I knew not where to go. Ah! you have abused me in every way; but now my turn has come!"

Blanche was so amazed that she could not articulate a syllable. At last, in a scarcely audible voice, she faltered:

"I do not understand you, aunt, I do not understand you."

The poor dependant shrugged her shoulders, as her niece had done a few moments before.

"In that case," said she, slowly, "I may as well tell you that since you have, against my will, made me your accomplice, we must share everything in com-

mon. I share the danger; I will share the pleasure. What if all should be discovered? Do you ever think of that? Yes, and that is why you are seeking diversion. Very well! I also desire diversion. I shall go to Paris with you."

By a terrible effort Blanche had succeeded in regaining her self-possession in some measure at least.

"And if I should say no?" she responded, coldly.

"But you will not say no."

"And why, if you please?"

"Because——"

"Will you go to the authorities and denounce me?"

Aunt Medea shook her head.

"I am not such a fool," she retorted. "I should only compromise myself. No, I shall not do that; but I might, perhaps, tell your husband what happened at the Borderie."

Blanche shuddered. No threat was capable of moving her like that.

"You shall accompany us, aunt," said she; "I promise it."

Then she added, gently:

"But it is unnecessary to threaten me. You have been cruel, aunt, and at the same time, unjust. If you have been unhappy in our house, you alone are to blame. Why have you said nothing? I attributed your complaisance to your affection for me. How was I to know that a woman as quiet and modest as yourself longed for fine apparel. Confess that it was impossible. Had I known—— But rest easy, aunt, I will atone for my neglect."

And as aunt Medea, having obtained all she desired, stammered an excuse.

"Nonsense!" Blanche exclaimed; "let us forget this foolish quarrel. You forgive me, do you not?"

And the two ladies embraced each other with the greatest effusion, like two friends, united after a misunderstanding. But Aunt Medea was as far from being deceived by this mock reconciliation as the clear-sighted Blanche.

"It will be best for me to keep on the *qui vive*," thought the humble relative. "God only knows with what intense joy my dear niece would send me to join Marie-Anne."

Perhaps a similar thought flitted through the mind of Madame Blanche.

She felt as a convict might feel on seeing his most execrated enemy, perhaps the man who had betrayed him, fastened to the other end of his chain.

"I am bound now and forever to this dangerous and perfidious creature," she thought. I am no longer my own mistress; I belong to her. When she commands, I must obey. I must be the slave of her every caprice—and she has forty years of humiliation and servitude to avenge."

The prospect of such a life made her tremble; and she racked her brain to discover some way of freeing herself from her detested companion.

Would it be possible to inspire Aunt Medea with a desire to live independently in her own house, served by her own servants?"

Might she succeed in persuading this silly old woman, who still longed for finery and ball-dresses, to marry? A handsome marriage portion will always attract a husband.

But, in either case, Blanche would require money—a large sum of money, for whose use she would be accountable to no one.

This conviction made her resolve to take possession of about two hundred and fifty thousand francs, in bank notes and coin, belonging to her father.

This sum represented the savings of the Marquis de Courtornieu during the past three years. No one knew he had laid it aside, except his daughter; and now that he had lost his reason, Blanche, who knew where the hoard was concealed, could take it for her own use without the slightest danger.

"With this," she thought, "I can at any moment enrich Aunt Medea without having recourse to Martial."

After this little scene there was a constant interchange of delicate attentions and touching devotion between the two ladies. It was "my dearest little aunt," and "my dearly beloved niece," from morning until night; and the gossips of the neighborhood, who had often commented upon the haughty disdain which Madame Blanche displayed in her treatment of her relative, would have found abundant food for comment had they known that Aunt Medea was protected from the possibility of cold by a mantle lined with costly fur, exactly like the marquise's own, and that she made the journey, not in the large Berlin, with the servants, but in the post-chaise with the Marquis and Marquise de Sairmeuse.

The change was so marked that even Martial remarked it, and as soon as he found himself alone with his wife, he exclaimed, in a tone of good-natured raillery:

"What is the meaning of all this devotion? We shall finish by encasing this precious aunt in cotton, shall we not?"

Blanche trembled, and flushed a little.

"I love good Aunt Medea so much!" said she. "I never can forget all the affection and devotion she lavished upon me when I was so unhappy."

It was such a plausible explanation that Martial took no further notice of the matter, for his mind just then was fully occupied.

The agent, whom he had sent to Paris in advance, to purchase, if possible, the Hotel de Sairmeuse, had written him to make all possible haste, as there was some difficulty about concluding the bargain.

"Plague take the fellow!" said the marquis, angrily, on receiving this news. "He is quite stupid enough to let this opportunity, for which we have been waiting ten years, slip through his fingers. I shall find no pleasure in Paris if I cannot own our old residence."

He was so impatient to reach Paris that, on the second day of their journey, he declared if he were alone he would travel all night.

"Do so now," said Blanche, graciously; "I do not feel fatigued in the least, and a night of travel does not appall me."

They did travel all night, and the next day, about nine o'clock, they alighted at the Hotel Meurice.

Martial scarcely took time to eat his breakfast.

"I must go and see my agent at once," he said, as he hurried off. "I will soon be back."

He reappeared in about two hours, pleased and radiant.

"My agent was a simpleton," he exclaimed. "He was afraid to write me that a man, upon whom the conclusion of the sale depends, demands a bonus of fifty thousand francs. He shall have it in welcome."

Then, in a tone of gallantry, which he always used in addressing his wife, he said:

"It only remains for me to sign the paper; but I will not do so unless the house suits you. If you are not too tired, I would like you to visit it at once. Time presses, and we have many competitors."

This visit was, of course, one of pure form; but Madame Blanche would have been hard to please if she had not been satisfied with this mansion, one of the most magnificent in Paris, with an entrance on the Rue de Grenelle, and large gardens shaded with superb trees, and extending to the Rue de Varennes.

Unfortunately, this superb dwel'ing had not been occupied for several years, and required many repairs.

"It will take at least six months to restore it," said Martial, "perhaps more. It is true that they might in three months, perhaps, render a portion of it very comfortable."

"It would be living in one's own house, at least," approved Blanche, divining her husband's wishes.

"Ah! then you agree with me! In that case, you may rest assured that I will expedite matters as much as possible."

In spite, or rather by reason of his immense fortune, the Marquis de Sairmeuse knew that a person is never so well, nor so quickly served, as when he serves himself, so he resolved to take the matter into his own hands. He conferred with architects, interviewed contractors, and hurried on the workmen.

As soon as he was up in the morning he started out without waiting for breakfast, and seldom returned until dinner.

Although Blanche was compelled to pass most of her time within doors, on account of the bad weather, she was not inclined to complain. Her journey, the unaccustomed sights and sounds of Paris, the novelty of life in a hotel, all combined to distract her thoughts from herself. She forgot her fears, a sort of haze enveloped the terrible scene at the Borderie; the clamors of conscience sank into faint whispers.

The past seemed fading away, and she was beginning to entertain hopes of a new and better life, when one day a servant entered, and said:

"There is a man below who wishes to speak with madame."

CHAPTER XCV.

HALF reclining upon a sofa Madame Blanche was listening to a new book which Aunt Medea was reading aloud, and she did not even raise her head as the servant delivered his message.

"A man?" she asked, carelessly; "what man?"

She was expecting no one; it must be one of the laborers employed by Martial.

"I cannot inform madame," replied the servant. "He is quite a young man; is dressed like a peasant, and is perhaps seeking a place."

"It is probably the marquis whom he desires to see."

"Madame will excuse me, but he said particularly that he desired to speak to her."

"Ask his name and his business, then. Go on, aunt," she added: "we have been inetrrupted in the most interesting portion."

But Aunt Medea had not time to finish the page when the servant reappeare l.

"The man says madame will understand his business when she hears his name"

"And his name?"

"Chupin."

It was as if a bomb-shell had exploded in the room.

Aunt Medea, with a shriek dropped her book, and sank back, half fainting, in her chair.

Blanche sprang up with a face as colorless as her white cashmere *peignoir*, her eyes troubled, her lips trembling.

"Chupin!" she repeated, as if she hoped the servant would tell her she had not understood him correctly; "Chupin!"

Then angrily.

"Tell this man that I will not see him, I will not see him, do you hear?"

But before the servant had time to bow respectfully and retire, the young marquise changed her mind.

"One moment," said she; "on reflection I think I will see him. Bring him up."

The servant withdrew, and the two ladies looked at each other in silent consternation.

"It must be one of Chupin's sons," faltered Blanche, at last.

"Undoubtedly; but what does he desire."

"Money, probably."

Aunt Medea lifted her eyes to Heaven.

"God grant that he knows nothing of your meetings with his father! Blessed Jesus! what if he should know."

"You are not going to despair in advance! We shall know all in a few moments. Pray be calm. Turn your back to us; look out into the street: do not let him see your face. But why is he so long in coming?"

Blanche was not deceived. It was Chupin's eldest son; the one to whom the dying poacher had confided his secret.

Since his arrival in Paris he had been running the streets from morning until evening, inquiring everywhere and of everybody the address of the Marquis de Sairmeuse. At last he discovered it; and he lost no time in presenting himself at the Hotel Meurice.

He was now awaiting the result of his application at the entrance of the Hotel, where he stood whistling, with his hands in his pockets, when the servant returned, saying:

"She consents to see you; follow me."

Chupin obeyed; but the servant, greatly astonished, and on fire with curiosity, loitered by the way in the hope of obtaining some explanation from this country youth.

"I do not say it to flatter you, my boy," he remarked, "but your name produced a great effect upon madame."

The prudent peasant carefully concealed the joy he felt on receiving this information.

"How does it happen that she knows you?" pursued the servant. "Are you both from the same place?"

"I am her foster-brother."

The servant did not believe a word of this response; but they had reached the apartment of the marquis, he opened the door and ushered Chupin into the room.

The peasant had prepared a little story in advance, but he was so dazzled by the magnificence around him that he stood motionless with staring eyes and gaping mouth. His wonder was increased by a large mirror opposite the door, in which he could survey himself from head to foot, and by the beautiful flowers on the carpet, which he feared to crush beneath his heavy shoes.

After a moment, Madame Blanche decided to break the silence.

"What do you wish?" she demanded.

With many circumlocutions Chupin explained that he had been obliged to leave Sairmeuse on account of the numerous enemies he had there, that he had been unable to find his father's hidden treasure, and that he was consequently without resources.

'Enough!" interrupted Mme. Blanche. Then in a manner not in the least friendly, she continued: "I do not understand why you should apply to me. You and all the rest of your family have anything but an enviable reputation in Sairmeuse; still, as you are from that part of the country, I am willing to aid you a little on condition that you do not apply to me again."

Chupin listened to this homily with a half cringing, half impudent air; when it was finished he lifted his head, and said, proudly:

"I do not ask for alms."

"What do you ask then?"

"My dues."

The heart of Madame Blanche sank, and yet she had courage to cast a glance of disdain upon the speaker, and said:

"Ah! do I owe you anything?"

"You owe me nothing personally, madame; but you owe a heavy debt to my deceased father. In whose service did he perish? Poor old man! he loved you devotedly. His last words were of you. 'A terrible thing has just happened at the Borderie, my boy,' said he, 'The young marquise hated Marie-Anne, and she has poisoned her. Had it not been for me she would have been lost. I am about to die; let the whole blame rest upon me; it will not hurt me, and it will save the young lady. And afterwards she will reward you; and as long as you keep the secret you will want for nothing.'"

Great as was his impudence, he paused, amazed by the perfectly composed face of the listener.

In the presence of such wonderful dissimulation he almost doubted the truth of his father's story.

The courage and heroism displayed by the marquise were really wonderful. She felt if she yielded once, she would forever be at the mercy of this wretch, as she was already at the mercy of Aunt Medea.

"In other words," said she, calmly, "you accuse me of the murder of Mlle.

Lacheneur; and you threaten to denounce me if I do not yield to your demands."

Chupin nodded his head in acquiescence.

"Very well!" said the marquise; since this is the case—go!"

It seemed, indeed, as if she would, by her audacity, win this dangerous game upon which her future peace depended. Chupin, greatly abashed, was standing there undecided what course to pursue when Aunt Medea, who was listening by the window, turned in affright, crying:

"Blanche! your husband—Martial! He is coming!"

The game was lost. Blanche saw her husband entering, finding Chupin, conversing with him, and discovering all!

Her brain whirled; she yielded.

She hastily thrust her purse in Chupin's hand and dragged him through an inner door and to the servants' staircase.

"Take this," she said, in a hoarse whisper. "I will see you again. And not a word—not a word to my husband, remember!"

She had been wise to yield in time. When she re-entered the *salon*, she found Martial there.

His head was bowed upon his breast; he held an open letter in his hand.

He looked up when his wife entered the room, and she saw a tear in his eye.

"What has happened?" she faltered.

Martial did not remark her emotion.

"My father is dead, Blanche," he replied.

"The Duke de Sairmeuse! My God! how did it happen?"

"He was thrown from his horse, in the forest, near the Sanguille rocks."

"Ah! it was there where my poor father was nearly murdered."

"Yes, it is the very place."

There was a moment's silence.

Martial's affection for his father had not been very deep, and he was well aware that his father had but little love for him. He was astonished at the bitter grief he felt on hearing of his death.

"From this letter, which was forwarded by a messenger from Sairmeuse," he continued, "I judge that everybody believes it to have been an accident; but I—I——"

"Well?"

"I believe he was murdered."

An exclamation of horror escaped Aunt Medea, and Blanche turned pale.

"Murdered!" she whispered.

"Yes, Blanche; and I could name the murderer. Oh! I am not deceived. The murderer of my father is the same man who attempted to assassinate the Marquis de Courtornieu——"

"Jean Lacheneur!"

Martial gravely bowed his head. It was his only reply.

"And you will not denounce him? You will not demand justice?"

Martial's face grew more and more gloomy.

"What good would it do?" he replied. "I have no material proofs to give, and justice demands incontestable evidence."

Then, as if communing with his own thoughts, rather than addressing his wife, he said, despondently:

"The Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu have reaped what they have sown. The blood of murdered innocence always calls for vengeance. Sooner or later, the guilty must expiate their crimes."

Blanche shuddered. Each word found an echo in her own soul. Had he intended his words for her, he would not have expressed himself differently.

"Martial," said she, trying to arouse him from his gloomy reverie, "Martial."

He did not seem to hear her, and, in the same tone, he continued:

"These Lacheneurs were happy and honored before our arrival at Sairmeuse. Their conduct was above all praise; their probity amounted to heroism. We might have made them our faithful and devoted friends. It was our duty, as well as in our interests, to have done so. We did not understand this; we humiliated, ruined, exasperated them. It was a fault for which we must atone. Who knows but, in Jean Lacheneur's place, I should have done what he has done?"

He was silent for a moment; then, with one of those sudden inspirations that sometimes enable one almost to read the future, he resumed:

"I know Jean Lacheneur. I, alone, can fathom his hatred, and I know that he lives only in the hope of vengeance. It is true that we are very high and he is very low, but that matters little. We have everything to fear. Our millions form a rampart around us, but he will know how to open a breach. And no precautions will save us. At the very moment when we feel ourselves secure, he will be ready to strike. What he will attempt, I know not; but his will be a terrible revenge. Remember my words, Blanche, if ruin ever threatens our house, it will be Jean Lacheneur's work."

Aunt Medea and her niece were too horror-stricken to articulate a word, and for five minutes no sound broke the stillness save Martial's monotonous tread, as he paced up and down the room.

At last he paused before his wife.

"I have just ordered post-horses. You will excuse me for leaving you here alone. I must go to Sairmeuse at once. I shall not be absent more than a week."

He departed from Paris a few hours later, and Blanche was left a prey to the most intolerable anxiety. She suffered more now than during the days that im-

mediately followed her crime. It was not against phantoms she was obliged to protect herself now; Chupin existed, and his voice, even if it were not as terrible as the voice of conscience, might make itself heard at any moment.

If she had known where to find him, she would have gone to him, and endeavored, by the payment of a large sum of money, to persuade him to leave France.

But Chupin had left the hotel without giving her his address.

The gloomy apprehension expressed by Martial increased the fears of the young marquise. The mere sound of the name Lacheneur made her shrink with terror. She could not rid herself of the idea that Jean Lacheneur suspected her guilt, and that he was watching her.

Her wish to find Marie-Anne's infant was stronger than ever.

It seemed to her that the child might be a protection to her some day. But where could she find an agent in whom she could confide?

At last she remembered that she had heard her father speak of a detective by the name of Chefteux, an exceedingly shrewd fellow, capable of anything, even honesty if he were well paid.

The man was really a miserable wretch, one of Fouche's vilest instruments, who had served and betrayed all parties, and who, at last, had been convicted of perjury, but had somehow managed to escape punishment.

After his dismissal from the police force, Chefteux had founded a bureau of private information.

After several inquiries, Madame Blanche discovered that he lived in the Place Dauphine; and she determined to take advantage of her husband's absence to pay the detective a visit.

One morning she donned her simplest dress, and, accompanied by Aunt Medea, repaired to the house of Chefteux.

He was then about thirty-four years of age, a man of medium height, of inoffensive mien, and who affected an unvarying good humor.

He invited his clients into a nicely furnished drawing-room, and Madame Blanche at once began telling him that she was married, and living in the Rue Saint-Denis, that one of her sisters, who had lately died, had been guilty of an indiscretion, and that she was ready to make any sacrifice to find this sister's child, etc., etc. A long story, which she had prepared in advance, and which sounded very plausible.

Chefteux did not believe a word of it, however; for, as soon as it was ended, he tapped her familiarly on the shoulder, and said:

"In short, my dear, we have had our little escapades before our marriage."

She shrank back as if from some venomous reptile.

To be treated thus! she—a Courtornieu—Duchesse de Sairmeuse!

"I think you are laboring under a wrong impression," she said, haughtily.

He made haste to apologize; but while listening to further details given him by the young lady, he thought:

"What an eye! what a voice!—they are not suited to a denizen of the Saint-Denis!"

His suspicions were confirmed by the reward of twenty thousand francs, which Madame Blanche imprudently promised him in case of success, and by the five hundred francs which she paid in advance.

"And where shall I have the honor of addressing my communications to you, madame?" he inquired.

"Nowhere," replied the young lady. "I shall be passing here from time to time, and I will call."

When they left the house, Chefteux followed them.

"For once," he thought, "I believe that fortune smiles upon me."

To discover the name and rank of his new clients was but child's play to Fouche's former pupil.

His task was all the easier since they had no suspicion whatever of his designs. Madame Blanche, who had heard his powers of discernment so highly praised, was confident of success.

All the way back to the hotel she was congratulating herself upon the step she had taken.

"In less than a month," she said to Aunt Medea, "we shall have the child; and it will be a protection to us."

But the following week she realized the extent of her imprudence. On visiting Chefteux again, she was received with such marks of respect that she saw at once she was known.

She made an attempt to deceive him, but the detective checked her.

"First of all," he said, with a good-humored smile, "I ascertain the identity of the persons who honor me with their confidence. It is a proof of my ability, which I give, gratis. But madame need have no fears. I am discreet by nature and by profession. Many ladies of the highest ranks are in the position of Madame la Duchesse!"

So Chefteux still believed that the Duchess de Sairmeuse was searching for her own child.

She did not try to convince him to the contrary. It was better that he should believe this than suspect the truth.

The condition of Madame Blanche was now truly pitiable. She found herself entangled in a net, and each movement, far from freeing her, tightened the meshes around her.

Three persons knew the secret that

threatened her life and honor. Under these circumstances, how could she hope to keep that secret inviolate? She was, moreover, at the mercy of three unscrupulous masters; and before a word, or a gesture, or a look from them, her haughty spirit was compelled to bow in meek subservience.

And her time was no longer at her own disposal. Martial had returned; and they had taken up their abode at the Hotel de Sairmeuse.

The young duchess was now compelled to live under the scrutiny of fifty servants —of forty enemies, more or less, interested in watching her, in criticizing her every act, and in discovering her inmost thoughts.

Aunt Medea, it is true, was of great assistance to her. Blanche purchased a dress for her, whenever she purchased one for herself, took her about with her on all occasions, and the humble relative expressed her satisfaction in the most enthusiastic terms, and declared her willingness to do anything for her benefactress.

Nor did Chefteux give Madame Blanche much more annoyance. Every three months he presented a memorandum of the expenses of investigations, which usually amounted to about ten thousand francs; and, so long as she paid him it was plain that he would be silent.

He had given her to understand, however, that he should expect an annuity of twenty-four thousand francs; and once, when Madame Blanche remarked that he must abandon the search, if nothing had been discovered at the end of two years:

"Never," he replied: "I shall continue the search as long as I live." But Chupin, unfortunately, remained; and he was a constant terror.

She had been compelled to give him twenty thousand francs, to begin with.

"He declared that his younger brother had come to Paris in pursuit of him, accusing him of having stolen their father's hoard, and demanding his share with his dagger in his hand.

There had been a battle, and it was with a head bound up in a blood-stained linen, that Chupin made his appearance before Madame Blanche.

"Give me the sum that the old man buried, and I will allow my brother to think that I had stolen it. It is not very pleasant to be regarded as a thief, when one is an honest man, but I will bear it for your sake. If you refuse, I shall be compelled to tell him where I have obtained my money, and how."

If he possessed all the vices, depravity, and cold-blooded perversity of his father, this wretch had inherited neither his intelligence nor his *finesse*.

Instead of taking the precautions which his interest required, he seemed to find a brutal pleasure in compromising the duchess.

He was a constant visitor at the hotel de Sairmeuse. He came and went at all hours, morning, noon, and night, without troubling himself in the least about Martial.

And the servants were amazed to see their haughty mistress unhesitatingly leave everything at the call of this suspicious-looking character, who smelled so strongly of tobacco and vile brandy.

One evening, while a grand entertainment was in progress at the Hotel de Sairmeuse, he made his appearance, half drunk, and imperiously ordered the servants to go and tell Madame Blanche that he was there, and that he was waiting for her.

She hastened to him in her magnificent evening-dress, her face white with rage and shame beneath her tiara of diamonds. And when, in her exasperation, she refused to give the wretch what he demanded:

"That is to say, I am to starve while your are revelling here!" he exclaimed. "I am not such a fool. Give me money, and instantly, or I will tell all I know here, and now!"

What could she do? She was obliged to yield, as she had always done before.

And yet he grew more and more insatiable every day. Money remained in his pockets no longer than water remains in a sieve. But he did not think of elevating his vices to the proportions of the fortune which he squandered. He did not even provide himself with decent clothing; from his appearance one would have supposed him a beggar, and his companions were the vilest and most degraded of beings.

One night he was arrested in a low den, and the police, surprised at seeing so much gold in the possession of such a beggarly-looking wretch, accused him of being a thief. He mentioned the name of the Duchess de Sairmeuse.

An inspector of the police presented himself at the Hotel de Sairmeuse the following morning. Martial, fortunately, was in Vienna at the time.

And Madame Blanche was forced to undergo the terrible humiliation of confessing that she had given a large sum of money to this man, whose family she had known, and who, she added, had once rendered her an important service.

Sometimes her tormentor changed his tactics.

For example, he declared that he disliked to come to the Hotel de Sairmeuse, that the servants treated him as if he were a mendicant, that after this he would write.

And in a day or two there would come a letter bidding her bring such a sum, to such a place, at such an hour.

And the proud duchess was always punctual at the rendezvous.

There was constantly some new invention, as if he found an intense delight in proving his power and in abusing it.

He had met, Heaven knows where! a certain Aspasie Clapard, to whom he took a violent fancy, and although she was much older than himself, he wished to marry her. Madame Blanche paid for the wedding feast.

Again he announced his desire of establishing himself in business, having resolved, he said, to live by his own exertions. He purchased the stock of a wine merchant, which the duchess paid for, and which he drank in no time.

His wife gave birth to a child, and Madame de Sairmeuse must pay for the baptism as she had paid for the wedding, only too happy that Chupin did not require her to stand as god-mother to little Polyte. He had entertained this idea at first.

On two occasions Madame Blanche accompanied her husband to Vienna and to London, whither he went charged with important diplomatic missions. She remained three years in foreign lands.

Each week during all that time she received one letter, at least, from Chupin.

Ah! many a time she envied the lot of her victim! What was Marie-Anne's death compared with the life she led!

Her sufferings were measured by years, Marie-Anne's by minutes; and she said to herself, again and again, that the torture of poison could not be as intolerable as her agony.

CHAPTER XCVI.

How was it that Martial had failed to discover or to suspect this state of affairs?

A moment's reflection will explain this fact which is so extraordinary in appearance, so natural in reality.

The head of a family, whether he dwells in an attic or in a palace, is always the last to know what is going on in his home. What everybody else knows he does not even suspect. The master often sleeps while his house is on fire. Some terrible catastrophe—an explosion—is necessary to arouse him from his fancied security.

The life that Martial led was likely to prevent him from arriving at the truth. He was a stranger to his wife. His manner toward her was perfect, full of deference and chivalrous courtesy; but they had nothing in common except a name and certain interests.

Each lived his own life. They met only at dinner, or at the entertainments which they gave and which were considered the most brilliant in Paris society.

The duchess had her own apartments, her servants, her carriages, her horses, her own table.

At twenty-five, Martial, the last descendant of the great house of Sairmeuse—a man upon whom destiny had apparently lavished every blessing—the possessor of youth, unbounded wealth, and a brilliant intellect, succumbed beneath the burden of an incurable despondency and *ennui*.

The death of Marie-Anne had destroyed all his hopes of happiness; and realizing the emptiness of his life, he did his best to fill the void with bustle and excitment. He threw himself headlong into politics, striving to find in power and in satisfied ambition some relief from his despondency.

It is only just to say that Madame Blanche had remained superior to circumstances; and that she had played the role of a happy, contented woman with consummate skill.

Her frightful sufferings and anxiety never marred the haughty serenity of her face. She soon won a place as one of the queens of Parisian society; and plunged into dissipation with a sort of frenzy. Was she endeavoring to divert her mind? Did she hope to overpower thought by excessive fatigue?

To Aunt Medea alone did Blanche reveal her secret heart.

"I am like a culprit who has been bound to the scaffold, and then abandoned by the executioner who says, as he departs: "Live until the axe falls of its own accord."

And the axe might fall at any moment. A word, a trifle, an unlucky chance—she dared not say "a decree of Providence," and Martial would know all.

Such, in all its unspeakable horror, was the position of the beautiful and envied Duchess de Sairmeuse. "She must be perfectly happy," said the world; but she felt herself sliding down the precipice to the awful depths below.

Like a ship wrecked mariner clinging to a floating spar, she scanned the horizon with a despairing eye, and saw only angry and threatening clouds.

Time, perhaps, might bring her some relief.

Once it happened that six weeks went by, and she heard nothing from Chupin. A month and a half! What had become of him? To Madame Blanche this silence was as ominous as the calm that precedes the storm.

A line in a newspaper solved the mystery.

Chupin was in prison.

The wretch, after drinking more heavily than usual one evening, had quarreled with his brother, and had killed him by a blow upon the head with a piece of iron.

The blood of the betrayed Lacheneur was visited upon the heads of his murderer's children.

Tried by the Court of Assizes, Chupin was condemned to twenty years of hard labor, and sent to Brest.

But this sentence afforded the duchess no relief. The culprit had written to her from his Paris prison; he wrote to her from Brest.

But he did not send his letters through the post. He confided them to comrades, whose terms of imprisonment had expired, and who came to the Hotel de Sairmeuse demanding an interview with the duchess.

And she received them. They told all the miseries they had endured "out there;" and usually ended by requesting some slight assistance.

One morning, a man whose desperate appearance and manner frightened her, brought the duchess this laconic epistle:

"I am tired of starving here; I wish to make my escape. Come to Brest; you can visit the prison, and we will decide upon some plan. If you refuse to do this, I shall apply to the duke, who will obtain my pardon in exchange of what I will tell him."

Madame Blanche was dumb with horror. It was impossibe, she thought, to sink lower than this.

"Well!" demanded the man, harshly. "What reply shall I make to my comrade?"

"I will go—tell him that I will go!" she said, driven to desperation.

She made the journey, visited the prison, but did not find Chupin.

The previous week there had been a revolt in the prison, the troops had fired upon the prisoners, and Chupin had been killed instantly.

Still the duchess dared not rejoice.

She feared that her tormentor had told his wife the secret of his power.

"I shall soon know," she thought.

The widow promptly made her appearance; but her manner was humble and supplicating.

She had often heard her dear, dead husband say that madame was his benefactress, and now she came to beg a little aid to enable her to open a small drinking saloon.

Her son Polyte—ah! such a good son! just eighteen years old, and such a help to his poor mother—had discovered a little house in a good situation for the business, and if they only had three or four hundred francs——

Madame Blanche gave her five hundred francs.

"Either her humility is a mask," she thought, "or her husband has told her nothing."

Five days later Polyte Chupin presented himself.

They needed three hundred francs more before they could commence business, and he came on behalf of his mother to entreat the kind lady to advance them.

Determined to discover exactly where she stood, the duchess shortly refused, and the young man departed without a word.

Evidently the mother and son were ignorant of the facts. Chupin's secret had died with him.

This happened early in January. Towards the last of February, Aunt Medea contracted inflammation of the lungs on leaving a fancy ball, which she attended in an absurd costume, in spite of all the attempts which her niece made to dissuade her.

Her passion for dress killed her. Her illness lasted only three days; but her sufferings, physical and mental, were terrible.

Constrained by her fear of death to examine her own conscience, she saw plainly that by profiting by the crime of her niece she had been as culpable as if she had aided her in committing it. She had been very devout in former years, and now her superstitious fears were re-awakened and intensified. Her faith returned accompanied by a cortege of terrors.

"I am lost!" she cried; "I am lost!"

She tossed to and fro upon her bed; she writhed and shrieked as if she already saw hell opening to engulf her.

She called upon the Holy Virgin and upon all the saints to protect her. She entreated God to grant her time for repentance and for expiation. She begged to see a priest, swearing she would make a full confession.

Paler than the dying woman, but implacable, Blanche watched over her, aided by that one of her personal attendants in whom she had most confidence.

"If this lasts long, I shall be ruined," she thought. "I shall be obliged to call for assistance, and she will betray me."

It did not last long.

The patient's delirium was succeeded by such utter prostration that it seemed each moment would be her last.

But towards midnight she appeared to revive a little, and in a voice of intense feeling, she said:

"You have had no pity, Blanche. You have deprived me of all hope in the life to come. God will punish you. You, too, shall die like a dog; alone, without a word of christian counsel or encouragement. I curse you!"

And she died just as the clock was striking two.

The time when Blanche would have given almost anything to know that Aunt Medea was beneath the sod, had long since passed.

Now, the death of the poor old woman affected her deeply.

She had lost an accomplice who had often consoled her, and she had gained nothing since one of her maids was now acquainted with the secret of the crime at the Borderie.

Every one who was intimately acquainted with the duchesse de Sairmeuse noticed her dejection, and was astonished by it.

"Is it not strange," remarked her friends, "that the duchess—such a very superior woman—should grieve so much for that absurd relative of hers."

But the dejection of Madame Blanche was due in great measure to the sinister prophecies of the accomplice to whom she had denied the last consolations of religion.

And as her mind reviewed the past she shuddered as the peasants at Sairmeuse had done, when she thought of the fatality which had pursued the shedders of innocent blood.

What misfortune had attended them all—from the sons of Chupin, the miserable traitor, up to her father, the Marquis de Courtornieu whose mind had not been illumined by the least gleam of reason for ten long years before his death.

"My turn will come!" she thought.

The Baron and the Baroness d'Escorval, and old Corporal Bavois had departed this life within a month of each other, the previous year, mourned by all.

So that of all the people of diverse condition who had been connected with the troubles at Montaignac, Blanche knew only four who were still alive.

Maurice d'Escorval, who had entered the magistracy, and was now a judge in the tribunal of the Seine; Abbe Midon who had come to Paris with Maurice, and Martial and herself.

There was another person the bare recollection of whom made her tremble, and whose name she dared not utter.

Jean Lacheneur, Marie-Anne's brother.

An inward voice, more powerful than reason, told her that this implacable enemy was still alive, watching for his hour of vengeance.

More troubled by her presentiments now, than she had been by Chupin's persecutions in days gone by, Madame de Sairmeuse decided to apply to Chefteux in order to ascertain, if possible, what she had to expect.

Fouche's former agent had not wavered in his devotion to the duchess. Every three months he presented his bill, which was paid without discussion; and to ease his conscience, he sent one of his men to prowl around Sairmeuse for awhile, at least once a year.

Animated by the hope of a magnificent reward, the spy promised his client, and—what was more to the purpose—promised himself, that he would discover this dreaded enemy.

He started in quest of him, and had already begun to collect proofs of Jean's existence, when his investigations were abruptly terminated.

One morning the body of a man literally hacked in pieces was found in an old well. It was the body of Chefteux.

"A fitting close to the career of such a wretch," said the *Journal des Debats*, in noting the event.

When she read this news, Madame Blanche felt as a culprit would feel on reading his death-warrant.

"The end is near," she murmured. "Lacheneur is coming!"

The duchess was not mistaken.

Jean had told the truth when he declared that he was not disposing off his sister's estate for his own benefit. In his opinion, Marie-Anne's fortune must be consecrated to one sacred purpose; he would not divert the slightest portion of it to his individual needs.

He was absolutely penniless when the manager of a traveling theatrical company engaged him for a consideration of forty-five francs per month.

From that day he lived the precarious life of a strolling player. He was poorly paid, and often reduced to abject poverty by lack of engagements, or by the impecuniosity of managers.

His hatred had lost none of its virulence; but to wreak the desired vengeance upon his enemy, he must have time and money at his disposal.

But how could he accumulate money when he was often too poor to appease his hunger.

Still he did not renounce his hopes. His was a rancor which was only intensified by years. He was biding his time while he watched from the depths of his misery the brilliant fortunes of the house of Sairmeuse.

He had waited sixteen years, when one of his friends procured him an engagement in Russia.

The engagement was nothing; but the poor comedian was afterwards fortunate enough to obtain an interest in a theatrical enterprise, from which he realized a fortune of one hundred thousand francs in less than six years.

"Now," said he, "I can give up this life. I am rich enough, now, to begin the warfare."

And six weeks later he arrived in his native village.

Before carrying any of his atrocious designs into execution, he went to Sairmeuse to visit Marie-Anne's grave in order to obtain there an increase of animosity, as well as the relentless *sang froid* of a stern avenger of crime.

That was his only motive in going, but, on the very evening of his arrival,

he learned through a garrulous old peasant woman that ever since his departure —that is to say, for a period of twenty years—two parties had been making persistent inquiries for a child which had been placed somewhere in the neighborhood.

Jean knew that it was Marie-Anne's child they were seeking. Why they had not succeeded in finding it, he knew equally well.

But why were there two persons seeking the child? One was Maurice d'Escorval, of course, but who was the other?

Instead of remaining at Sairmeuse a week, Jean Lacheneur tarried there a month; and by the expiration of that month he had traced these inquiries concerning the child to the agent of Chefteux. Through him, he reached Fouche's former spy; and, finally, succeeded in discovering that the search had been instituted by no less a person than the Duchesse de Sairmeuse.

This discovery bewildered him. How could Madame Blanche have known that Marie-Anne had given birth to a child; and knowing it, what possible interest could she have had in finding it?

These two questions tormented Jean's mind continually; but he could discover no satisfactory answer.

"Chupin's son could tell me," perhaps, he thought. "I must pretend to be reconciled to the sons of the wretch, who betrayed my father."

But the traitor's children had been dead for several years, and after a long search, Jean found only the Widow Chupin, and her son, Polyte.

They were keeping a drinking-saloon not far from the Chateau-des-Rentiers; and their establishment, known as the Poivriere, bore anything but an enviable reputation.

Lacheneur questioned the widow and her son in vain; they could give him no information whatever, on the subject. He told them his name, but even this did not awaken the slightest recollection in their minds.

Jean was about take his departure when Mother Chupin, probably in the hope of extracting a few pennies began to deplore her present misery, which was, she declared, all the harder to bear since she had wanted for nothing during the life of her poor husband, who had always obtained as much money as he wanted from a lady of high degree—the Duchess de Sairmeuse, in short.

Lacheneur uttered such a terrible oath that the old woman and her son started back in affright.

He saw at once the close connection between the researches of Madame Blanche and her generosity to Chupin.

"It was she who poisoned Marie-Anne," he said to himself. "It was through my sister that she became aware of the existence of the child. She loaded Chupin with favors because he knew the crime she had committed—that crime in which his father had been only an accomplice."

He remembered Martial's oath at the bedside of the murdered girl, and his heart overflowed with savage exultation. He saw his two enemies, the last of the Sairmeuse and the last of the Courtornieu take in their own hands his work of vengeance.

But this was mere conjecture; he desired to be assured of the correctness of his suppositions.

He drew from his pocket a handful of gold, and, throwing it upon the table, he said:

"I am very rich; if you will obey me and keep my secret, your fortune is made."

A shrill cry of delight from mother and son outweighed any protestations of obedience.

The Widow Chupin knew how to write, and Lacheneur dictated this letter:

"MADAME LA DUCHESSE—I shall expect you at my establishment to-morrow between twelve and four o'clock. It is on business connected with the Borderie. If at five o'clock I have not seen you, I shall carry to the post a letter for the duke."

"And if she comes what am I to say to her?" asked the astonished widow.

"Nothing; you will merely ask her for money."

"If she comes, it is as I have guessed," he reflected.

She came.

Hidden in the loft of the *Poivriere*, Jean, through an opening in the floor, saw the duchess give a bank-note to Mother Chupin.

"Now, she is in my power!" he thought exultantly. "Through what sloughs of degradation will I drag her before I deliver her up to her husband's vengeance!"

CHAPTER XCVII.

A FEW lines of the article consecrated to Martial de Sairmeuse in the "General Biography of the Men of the Century," give the history of his life after his marriage.

"Martial de Sairmeuse," it says, there, "brought to the service of his party a brilliant intellect and admirable endowments. Called to the front at the moment when political strife was raging with the utmost violence, he had courage to assume the sole responsibility of the most extreme measures.

"Compelled by almost universal opprobrium to retire from office, he left behind him animosities which will be extinguished only with life."

But what this article does not state is this: if Martial was wrong—and that depends entirely upon the point of view from which his conduct is regarded—he was doubly wrong, since he was not possessed of those ardent convictions verging upon fanaticism which make men fools. heroes and martyrs.

He was not even ambitious.

Those associated with him, witnessing his passionate struggle and his unceasing activity, thought him actuated by an insatiable thirst for power.

He cared little or nothing for it. He considered its burdens heavy; its compensations small. His pride was too lofty to feel any satisfaction in the applause that delights the vain, and flattery disgusted him. Often, in his princely drawing-rooms, during some brilliant *fete*, his acquaintances noticed a shade of gloom steal over h.s features, and seeing him thus thoughtful and preoccupied, they respectfully refrained from disturbing him.

"His mind is occupied with momentous questions," they thought. "Who can tell what important decisions may result from this reverie."

They were mistaken.

At the very moment when his brilliant success made his rivals pale with envy—when it would seem that he had nothing left to wish for in this world, Martial was saying to himself:

"What an empty life! What weariness and vexation of spirit! To live for others—what a mockery!"

He looked at his wife, radiant in her beauty, worshiped like a queen, and he sighed.

He thought of her who was dead—Marie-Anne—the only woman whom he had ever loved.

She was never absent from his mind. After all these years he saw her yet, cold, rigid, lifeless, in that luxurious room at the Borderie; and time, far from effacing the image of the fair girl who had won his youthful heart, made it still more radiant and endowed his lost idol with almost superhuman grace of person and of character.

If fate had but given him Marie-Anne for his wife! He said this to himself again and again, picturing the exquisite happiness which a life with her would have afforded h m.

They would have remained at Sairmeuse. They would have had lovely children playing around them! He would not be condemned to this continual warfare—to this hollow, unsatisfying, restless life.

The truly happy are not those who parade their satisfaction and good fortune before the eyes of the multitu le. The truly happy hide themselves from the curious gaze, and they are right; happiness is almost a crime.

So thought Martial; and he, the great statesman, often said to himself, in a sort of rage:

"To love, and to be loved—that is every thing! All else is vanity."

He had really tried to love his wife; he had done his best to rekindle the admiration with which she had inspired him at their first meeting. He had not succeeded.

Between them there seemed to be a wall of ice which nothing could melt, and which was constantly increasing in height and thickness.

"Why is it?" he wondered. again and again. "It is incomprehensible. There are days when I could swear that she loved me. Her character, formerly so irritable, is entirely changed; she is gentleness itself.

But he could not conquer his aversion; it was stronger than his own will.

These unavailing regrets, and the disappointments and sorrow that preyed upon him, undoubtedly aggravated the bitterness and severity of Martial's policy.

But he, at least, knew how to fall nobly.

He passed, without even a change of countenance, from almost omnipotence to a position so compromising that his very life was endangered.

On seeing his ante-chambers, formerly thronged with flatterers and office-seekers, empty and deserted, he laughed, and his laugh was unaffected.

"The ship is sinking," said he; "the rats have deserted it."

He did not even pale when the noisy crowd came to hoot and curse and hurl stones at his windows; and when Otto, his faithful valet de chambre, entreated him to assume a disguise and make his escape through the gardens, he responded:

"By no means! I am simply odious; I do not wish to become ridiculous!"

They could not even dissuade him from going to a window and looking down upon the rabble in the street below.

A singular idea had just occurred to him.

"If Jean Lacheneur is still alive," he thought, "how much he would enjoy this! And if he is alive, he is undoubtedly there in the foremost rank, urging on the crowd."

And he wished to see.

But Jean Lacheneur was in Russia at that epoch. The excitement subsided; the Hotel de Sairmeuse was not seriously threatened. Still Martial realized that it would be better for him to go away

for awhile, and allow people to forget him.

He did not ask the duchess to accompany him.

"The fault has been mine entirely," he said to her, "and to make you suffer for it by condemning you to exile would be unjust. Remain here; I think it will be much better for you to remain here."

She did not offer to go with him. It would have been a pleasure to her, but she dared not leave Paris. She knew that she must remain in order to insure the silence of her persecutors. Both times she had left Paris before, all came near being discovered, and yet she had Aunt Medea, then, to take her place.

Martial went away, accompanied only by his devoted servant, Otto. In intelligence, this man was decidedly superior to his position; he possessed an independent fortune, and he had a hundred reasons—one, by the way was a very pretty one—for desiring to remain in Paris; but his master was in trouble, and he did not hesitate.

For four years the Duke de Sairmeuse wandered over Europe, ever accompanied by his *ennui* and his dejection, and chafing beneath the burden of a life no longer animated by interest or sustained by hope.

He remained awhile in London, then he went to Vienna, afterwards to Venice. One day he was seized by an irresistible desire to see Paris again, and he returned.

It was not a very prudent step, perhaps. His bitterest enemies—personal enemies, whom he had mortally offended and persecuted—were in power; but he did not hesitate. Besides, how could they injure him, since he had no favors to ask, no cravings of ambition to satisfy?

The exile which had weighed so heavily upon him, the sorrow, the disappointments and loneliness he had endured had softened his nature and inclined his heart to tenderness: and he returned firmly resolved to overcome his aversion to his wife, and seek a reconciliation.

"Old age is approaching," he thought. "If I have not a beloved wife at my fireside, I may at least have a friend."

His manner towards her, on his return, astonished Madame Blanche. She almost believed she saw again the Martial of the little blue *salon* at Courtornieu; but the realization of her cherished dream was now only another torture added to all the others.

Martial was striving to carry his plan into execution, when the following laconic epistle came to him one day through the post:

"MONSIEUR LE DUC—I, if I were in your place, would watch my wife."

It was only an anonymous letter, but Martial's blood mounted to his forehead.

"Can it be that she has a lover?" he thought.

Then reflecting on his own conduct towards his wife since their marriage, he said to himself:

"And if she has, have I any right to complain? Did I not tacitly give her back her liberty?"

He was greatly troubled, and yet he would not have degraded himself so much as to play the spy, had it not been for one of those trifling circumstances which so often decide a man's destiny.

He was returning from a ride on horseback one morning about eleven o'clock, and he was not thirty paces from the Hotel de Sairmeuse when he saw a lady hurriedly emerge from the house. She was very plainly dressed—entirely in black—but her whole appearance was strikingly that of the duchess.

"It is certainly my wife: but why is she dressed in such a fashion?" he thought.

Had he been on foot he would certainly have entered the house; as it was, he slowly followed Madame Blanche who was going up the Rue Grenelle. She walked very quickly, and without turning her head, and kept her face persistently shrouded in a very thick veil.

When she reached the Rue Taranne, she threw herself into one of the *fiacres* at the carriage-stand.

The coachman came to the door to speak to her; then nimbly sprang upon the box, and gave his bony horses one of those cuts of the whip that announce a princely *pour-boire*.

The carriage had already turned the corner of the Rue du Dragon, and Martial, ashamed and irresolute, had not moved from the place where he had stopped his horse, just around the corner of the Rue Saint Pares.

Not daring to admit his suspicions, he tried to deceive himself.

"Nonsense!" he thought, giving the reins to his horse, "what do I risk in advancing? The carriage is a long ways off by this time, and I shall not overtake it."

He did overtake it, however, on reaching the intersection of the Croix-Rouge, where there was, as usual, a crowd of vehicles.

It was the same *fiacre;* Martial recognized it by its green body, and its wheels striped with white.

Emerging from the crowd of carriages, the driver whipped up his horses, and it was at a gallop that they flew up the Rue du Vieux Columbier—the narrowest street that borders the Place Saint Sulpice—and gained the outer boulevards.

Martial's thoughts were busy as he trotted along about a hundred yards behind the vehicle.

"She is in a terrible hurry," he said to himself. "This, however, is scarcely the quarter for a lover's rendezvous."

The carriage had passed the Place d'Italie. It entered the Rue du Chateau-des-Rentiers and soon paused before a tract of unoccupied ground.

The door was at once opened, and the Duchesse de Sairmeuse hastily alighted.

Without stopping to look to the right or to the left, she hurried across the open space.

A man, by no means prepossessing in appearance, with a long beard, and with a pipe in his mouth, and clad in a workman's blouse, was seated upon a large block of stone not far off.

"Will you hold my horse a moment?" inquired Martial.

"Certainly," answered the man.

Had Martial been less preoccupied, his suspicions might have been aroused by the malicious smile that curved the man's lips: and had he examined his features closely, he would perhaps have recognized him.

For it was Jean Lacheneur.

Since addressing that anonymous letter to the Duke de Sairmeuse, he had made the duchess multiply her visits to the Widow Chupin; and each time he had watched for her coming.

"So, if her husband decides to follow her I shall know it," he thought.

It was indispensable for the success of his plans that Madame Blanche should be watched by her husband.

For Jean Lacheneur had decided upon his course. From a thousand schemes for revenge he had chosen the most frightful and ignoble that a brain maddened and enfevered by hatred could possibly conceive.

He longed to see the haughty Duchesse de Sairmeuse subjected to the vilest ignominy, Martial in the hands of the lowest of the low. He pictured a bloody struggle in this miserable den; the sudden arrival of the police, summoned by himself, who would arrest all the parties indiscriminately. He gloated over the thought of a trial in which the crime committed at the Borderie would be brought to light; he saw the duke and the duchess in prison, and the great names of Sairmeuse and of Courtornieu shrouded in eternal disgrace.

And he believed that nothing was wanting to insure the success of his plans. He had at his disposal two miserable wretches who were capable of any crime; and an unfortunate youth named Gustave, made his willing slave by poverty and cowardice, was intended to play the part of Marie-Anne's son.

These three accomplices had no suspicion of his real intentions. As for the Widow Chupin and her son, if they suspected some infamous plot, the name of the duchess was all they really knew in regard to it. Moreover, Jean held Polyte and his mother completely under his control by the wealth which he had promised them if they served him docilely.

And if Martial followed his wife into the Poivriere, Jean had so arranged matters that the duke would at first suppose that she had been led there by charity.

"But he will not go in," thought Lacheneur, whose heart throbbed wildly with sinister joy as he held Martial's horse. "Monsieur le Duc is too fine for that."

And Martial did not go in. Though he was horrified when he saw his wife enter that vile den, as if she were at home there, he said to himself that he should learn nothing by following her.

He, therefore, contented himself by making a thorough examination of the outside of the house; then, remounting his horse, he departed on a gallop. He was completely mystified; he did not know what to think, what to imagine, what to believe.

But he was fully resolved to fathom this mystery; and as soon as he returned home he sent Otto out in search of information. He could confide everything to this devoted servant; he had no secrets from him.

About four o'clock his faithful valet de chambre returned, an expression of profound consternation visible upon his countenance.

"What is it?" asked Martial, divining some great misfortune.

"Ah, sir, the mistress of that wretched den is the widow of Chupin's son——"

Martial's face became as white as his linen.

He knew life too well not to understand that since the duchess had been compelled to submit to the power of these people, they must be masters of some secret which she was willing to make any sacrifice to preserve. But what secret?

The years which had silvered Martial's hair, had not cooled the ardor of his blood. He was, as he had always been, a man of impulses.

He rushed to his wife's apartments.

"Madame has just gone down to receive the Countess de Mussidan and the Marquise d'Arlange," said the maid.

"Very well; I will wait for her here. Retire."

And Martial entered the chamber of Madame Blanche.

The room was in disorder, for the duchess, after returning from the Poivriere, was still engaged in her toilette when the visitors were announced.

The wardrobe-doors were open, the chairs were encumbered with wearing apparel, the articles which Madame

Blanche used daily—her watch, her purse, and several bunches of keys—were lying upon the dressing-table and mantel.

Martial did not sit down. His self-possession was returning.

"No folly," he thought, "if I question her, I shall learn nothing. I must be silent and watchful."

He was about to retire, when, on glancing about the room, his eyes fell upon a large casket, inlaid with silver, which had belonged to his wife ever since she was a young girl, and which accompanied her everywhere.

"That, doubtless, holds the solution of the mystery," he said to himself.

It was one of those moments when a man obeys the dictates of passion without pausing to reflect. He saw the keys upon the mantel; he seized them, and endeavored to find one that would fit the lock of the casket. The fourth key opened it. It was full of papers.

With feverish haste, Martial examined the contents. He had thrown aside several unimportant letters, when he came to a bill that read as follows:

"Search for the child of Madame de Sairmeuse. Expenses for the third quarter of the year 18—."

Martial's brain reeled.

A child! His wife had a child!

He read on: "For services of two agents at Sairmeuse, ——. For expenses attending my own journey, ——. Divers gratuities, ——. Etc., etc." The total amounted to six thousand francs. The bill was signed "Chefteux."

With a sort of cold rage, Martial continued his examination of the contents of the casket, and found a note written in a miserable hand, that said: "Two thousand francs this evening, or I will tell the duke the history of the affair at the Borderie." Then several more bills from Chefteux; then a letter from Aunt Medea in which she spoke of prison and of remorse. And finally, at the bottom of the casket, he found the marriage certificate of Marie-Anne Lacheneur and Maurice d'Escorval, drawn up by the cure of Vigano and signed by the old physician and Corporal Bavois.

The truth was as clear as daylight.

Stunned, frozen with horror, Martial scarcely had strength to return the letters to the casket and restore it to its place.

Then he tottered back to his own room, clinging to the walls for support.

"It was she who murdered Marie-Anne," he murmured.

He was confounded, terror-stricken by the perfidy and baseness of this woman who was his wife—by her criminal audacity, by her cool calculation and assurance, by her marvelous powers of dissimulation.

He swore he would discover all, either through the duchess or through the Widow Chupin; and he ordered Otto to procure a costume for him such as was generally worn by the *habitues* of the Poivriere. He did not know how soon he might have use for it.

This happened early in February, and from that moment Madame Blanche did not take a single step without being watched. Not a letter reached her that her husband had not previously read.

And she had not the slightest suspicion of the constant espionage to which she was subjected.

Martial did not leave his room; he pretended to be ill. To meet his wife and be silent, was beyond his powers. He remembered the oath of vengeance which he had pronounced over Marie-Anne's lifeless form too well.

But there were no new revelations, and for this reason: Polyte Chupin had been arrested under charge of theft, and this accident caused a delay in the execution of Lacheneur's plans. But, at last, he judged that all would be in readiness on the 20th of February, Shrove Sunday.

The evening before the Widow Chupin, in conformance with his instructions, wrote to the duchess that she must come to the Poivriere Sunday evening at eleven o'clock.

On that same evening Jean was to meet his accomplices at a ball at the Rainbow—a public house bearing a very unenviable reputation—and give them their last instructions.

These accomplices were to open the scene; he was to appear only in the *denouement*.

"All is well arranged; the mechanism will work of its own accord," he said to himself.

But the "mechanism" as he styled it, failed to work.

Madame Blanche, on receiving the Widow Chupin's summons, revolted for a moment. The lateness of the hour, the isolation of the spot designated, frightened her.

But she was obliged to submit, and on the appointed evening she furtively left the house, accompanied by Camille, the same servant who had witnessed Aunt Medea's last agony.

The duchess and her maid were attired like women of the very lowest order, and felt no fear of being seen or recognized.

And yet a man was watching them, and he quickly followed them. It was Martial.

Knowing of this rendezvous even before his wife, he had disguised himself in the costume Otto had procured for him, which was that of a laborer about the quays; and, as he was a man who did perfectly whatever he attempted to do, he had succeeded in rendering himself unrecognizable. His hair and beard were

rough and matted; his hands were soiled and grimed with dirt; he was really the abject wretch whose rags he wore.

Otto had begged to be allowed to accompany him; but the duke refused, saying that the revolver which he would take with him would be sufficient protection. He knew Otto well enough, however, to be certain he would disobey him.

Ten o'clock was sounding when Madame Blanche and Camille left the house, and it did not take them five minutes to reach the Rue Taranne.

There was one *fiacre* on the stand—one only.

They entered it and it drove away.

This circumstance drew from Martial an oath worthy of his costume. Then he reflected that, since he knew where to find his wife, a slight delay in finding a carriage did not matter.

He soon obtained one; and the coachman, thanks to a *pour-boire* of ten francs, drove to the Rue du Chateau-des-Rentiers as fast as his horses could go.

But the duke had scarcely set foot on the ground before he heard the rumbling of another carriage which stopped abruptly at a little distance.

"Otto is evidently following me," he thought.

And he started across the open space in the direction of the Poivriere.

Gloom and silence prevailed on every side, and were made still more oppressive by a chill fog that heralded an approaching thaw. Martial stumbled and slipped at almost every step upon the rough, snow-covered ground.

It was not long before he could distinguish a dark mass in the midst of the fog. It was the Poivriere. The light within filtered through the heart-shaped openings in the blinds, looking at a distance like lurid eyes gleaming in the darkness.

Could it really be possible that the Duchesse de Sairmeuse was there!

Martial cautiously approached the window, and clinging to the hinges of one of the shutters, he lifted himself up so he could peer through the opening.

Yes, his wife was indeed there in that vile den.

She and Camille were seated at a table before a large punch-bowl, and in company with two ragged, leering scoundrels, and a soldier, quite youthful in appearance.

In the centre of the room stood the Widow Chupin, with a small glass in her hand, talking volubly and punctuating her sentences by copious draughts of brandy.

The impression produced upon Martial was so terrible that his hold relaxed and he dropped to the ground.

A ray of pity penetrated his soul, for he vaguely realized the frightful suffering which had been the chastisement of the murderess.

But he desired another glance at the interior of the hovel, and he again lifted himself up to the opening and looked in.

The old woman had disappeared; the young soldier had risen from the table and was talking and gesticulating earnestly. Madame Blanche and Camille were listening to him with the closest attention.

The two men who were sitting face to face, with their elbows upon the table, were looking at each other; and Martial saw them exchange a significant glance.

He was not wrong. The scoundrels were plotting "a rich haul."

Madame Blanche, who had dressed herself with such care, that to render her disguise perfect she had encased her feet in large, coarse shoes, that were almost killing her—Madame Blanche had forgotten to remove her superb diamond ear-rings.

She had forgotten them, but Lacheneur's accomplices had noticed them, and were now regarding them with eyes that glittered more brilliantly than the diamonds themselves.

While awaiting Lacheneur's coming, these wretches, as had been agreed upon, were playing the part which he had imposed upon them. For this, and their assistance afterwards, they were to receive a certain sum of money.

But they were thinking that this sum was not, perhaps, a quarter part of the value of these jewels, and they exchanged glances that said:

"Ah! if we could only get them and make our escape before Lacheneur comes!"

The temptation was too strong to be resisted.

One of them rose suddenly, and, seizing the duchess by the back of the neck, he forced her head down upon the table.

The diamonds would have been torn from the ears of Madame Blanche had it not been for Camille, who bravely came to the aid of her mistress.

Martial could endure no more. He sprang to the door of the hovel, opened it, and entered, bolting it behind him.

"Martial!"

"Monsieur le Duc!"

These cries escaping the lips of Madame Blanche and Camille in the same breath, changed the momentary stupor of their assailants into fury; and they both precipitated themselves upon Martial, determined to kill him.

With a spring to one side, Martial avoided them. He had his revolver in his hand; he fired twice and the wretches fell.

But he was not yet safe, for the young

soldier threw himself upon him, and attempted to disarm him.

Through all the furious struggle, Martial did not cease crying in a panting voice;

"Fly! Blanche, fly! Otto is not far off. The name—save the honor of the name!"

The two women obeyed, making their escape through the back door. which opened upon the garden; and they had scarcely done so, before a violent knocking was heard at the front door.

The police were coming! This increased Martial's frenzy: and with one supreme effort to free himself from his assailant, he gave him such a violent push that his adversary fell, striking his head against the corner of the table, after which he lay like one dead.

But the widow Chupin, who had come down-stairs on hearing the uproar, was shrieking upon the stairs. At the door some one was crying: "Open in the name of the law!"

Martial might have fled; but if he fled, the duchess might be captured. for he would certainly be pursued. He saw the peril at a glance, and his decision was made.

He shook the Widow Chupin violently by the arm, and said, in an imperious voice:

"If you know how to hold your tongue you shall have one hundred thousand francs."

Then, drawing a table before the door opening into the ajoining room, he intrenched himself behind it as behind a rampart, and awaited the approach of the enemy.

The next moment the door was forced open, and a squad of police, under the command of Inspector Gevrol, entered the room.

"Surrender!" cried the inspector.

Martial did not move; his pistol was turned upon the intruder.

"If I can parley with them, and hold them in check only two minutes, all may yet be saved." he thought.

He obtained the wished-for delay; then he threw his weapon to the ground, and was about to bound though the back-door, when a policeman, who had gone round to the rear of the house, seized him about the body, and threw him to the floor.

From this side he expected only assistance, so he cried:

"Lost! It is the Prussians who are coming!"

In the twinkling of an eye. he was bound; and two hours later he was an inmate of the station-house at the Place d'Italie.

He had played his part so perfectly, that he had deceived even Gevrol. The other participants in the broil were dead, and he could rely upon the Widow Chupin. But he knew that the trap had been set for him by Jean Lacheneur; and he read a whole volume of suspicion in the eyes of the young officer who had cut off his retreat, and who was called Lecoq by his companions.

CHAPTER XCVIII.

THE Duke de Sairmeuse was one of those men who remain superior to all fortutious circumstances, good or bad. He was a man of vast experience, and great natural shrewdness. His mind was quick to act. and fertile in resources. But when he found himself immured in the damp and loathsome station-house, after the terrible scenes at the Poivriere, he relinquished all hope.

Martial knew that Justice does not trust to appearances, and that when she finds herself confronted by a mystery, she does not rest until she has fathomed it.

Martial knew, only too well, that if his identity was established, the authorities would endeavour to discover the reason of his presence at the Poivriere. That this reason would soon be discovered, he could not doubt, and, in that case, the crime at the Borderie, and the guilt of the duchess, would undoubtedly be made public.

This meant the Court of Assizes, prison, a frightful scandal, dishonor, eternal disgrace!

And the power he had wielded in former days was a positive disadvantage to him now. His place was now filled by his political adversaries. Among them were two personal enemies upon whom he had inflicted those terrible wounds of vanity which are never healed. What an opportunity for revenge this would afford them!

At the thought of this ineffaceable stain upon the great name of Sairmeuse, which was his pride and his glory, reason almost forsook him.

"My God, inspire me," he murmured. "How shall I save the honor of the name?"

He saw but one chance of salvation—death. They now believed him one of the miserable wretches that haunt the suburbs of Paris; if he were dead they would not trouble themselves about his identity.

"It is the only way!" he thought.

He was endeavoring to find some means of accomplishing his plan of self-destruction, when he heard a bustle and confusion outside. In a few moments the door was opened and a man was thrust into the same cell—a man who staggered a few steps, fell heavily to the floor, and began to snore loudly. It was only a drunken man.

But a gleam of hope illumined Martial's heart, for in the drunken man he recog-

nized Otto—disguised, almost unrecognizable.

It was a bold ruse and no time must be lost in profiting by it. Martial stretched himself upon a bench, as if to sleep, in such a way that his head was scarcely a yard from that of Otto.

"The duchess is out of danger," murmured the faithful servant.

"For to-day, perhaps. But to-morrow, through me, all will be known."

"Have you told them who you are?"

"No; all the policemen but one took me for a vagabond."

"You must continue to personate this character."

"What good will it do? Lacheneur will betray me."

But Martial, though he little knew it, had no need to fear Lacheneur for the present, at least. A few hours before, on his way from the Rainbow to the Poivriere, Jean had been precipitated to the bottom of a stone quarry, and had fractured his skull. The laborers, on returning to their work early in the morning, found him lying there senseless; and at that very moment they were carrying him to the hospital.

Although Otto was ignorant of this circumstance, he did not seem discouraged.

"There will be some way of getting rid of Lacheneur," said he, "if you will only sustain your present character. An escape is an easy matter when a man has millions at his command."

"They will ask me who I am, whence I came, how I have lived."

"You speak English and German; tell them that you have just returned from foreign lands; that you were a foundling and that you have always lived a roving life."

"How can I prove this?"

Otto drew a little nearer his master, and said, impressively:

"We must agree upon our plans, for our success depends upon a perfect understanding between us. I have a sweetheart in Paris—and no one knows our relations. She is as sharp as steel. Her name is Milner, and she keeps the Hotel de Mariembourg, on the Saint-Quentin. You can say that you arrived here from Leipsic on Sunday; that you went to this hotel; that you left your trunk there, and that this trunk is marked with the name of May, foreign artist."

"Capital!" said Martial, approvingly.

And then, with extraordinary quickness and precision, they agreed, point by point, upon their plan of defence.

When all had been arranged, Otto pertended to awake from the heavy sleep of intoxication; he clamored to be released, and the keeper finally opened the door and set him at liberty.

Before leaving the station-house, however, he succeeded in throwing a note to the Widow Chupin, who was imprisoned in the other compartment.

So, when Lecoq, after his skillful investigations at the Poivriere, rushed to the Place d'Italie, panting with hope and ambition, he found himself outwitted by these men, who were inferior to him in penetration, but whose *finesse* was superior to his own.

Martial's plans being fully formed, he intended to carry them out with absolute perfection of detail, and, after his removal to prison, the Duke de Sairmeuse was preparing himself for the visit of the judge of instruction, when Maurice d'Escorval entered.

They recognized each other. They were both terribly agitated, and the examination was an examination only in name. After the departure of Maurice, Martial attempted to destroy himself. He had no faith in the generosity of his former enemy.

But when he found M. Segmuller occupying Maurice's place the next morning, Martial believed that he was saved.

Then began that struggle between the judge and Lecoq on one side, and the accused on the other—a struggle from which neither party came out conqueror.

Martial knew that Lecoq was the only person he had to fear, still he bore him no ill-will. Faithful to his nature, which compelled him to be just even to his enemies, he could not help admiring the astonishing penetration and perseverance of this young policeman who, undismayed by the obstacles and discouragements that surrounded him, struggled on, unassisted, to reach the truth.

But Lecoq was always outwitted by Otto, the mysterious accomplice, who seemed to know his every movement in advance.

At the Morgue, at the Hotel de Mariembourg, with Toinon, the wife of Polyte Chupin, as well as with Polyte Chupin himself, Lecoq was just a little too late.

Lecoq detected the secret correspondence between the prisoner and his accomplice. He was even ingenious enough to discover the key to it, but this served no purpose. A man, who had seen a rival, or rather, a future master, in Lecoq had betrayed him.

If his efforts to arrive at the truth through the jeweler and the Marquis d'Arlange had failed, it was only because Madame Blanche had not purchased the diamond ear-rings she wore at the Poivriere at any shop, but from one of her friends, the Baroness de Watchau.

And lastly, if no one at Paris had missed the Duke de Sairmeuse, it was because—thanks to an understanding between the duchess, Otto, and Camille—no other inmate of the Hotel de Sairmeuse suspected his absence. All the servants supposed

their master confined to his room by illness. They prepared all sorts of gruels and broths for him, and his breakfast and dinner were taken to his apartments every day.

So the weeks went by, and Martial was expecting to be summoned before the Court of Assizes and condemned under the name of May, when he was afforded an opportunity to escape.

Too shrewd not to discern the trap that had been set for him, he endured some moments of horrible hesitation in the prison-van.

He decided to accept the risk, however, commending himself to his lucky star.

And he decided wisely, for that same night he leaped his own garden wall, leaving, as a hostage, in the hands of Lecoq, an escaped convict, Joseph Conturier by name, whom he had picked up in a low drinking saloon.

Warned by Madame Milner, thanks to a blunder on the part of Lecoq, Otto was awaiting his master.

In the twinkling of an eye Martial's beard fell under the razor; he plunged into the bath that was awaiting him, and his clothing was burned.

And it was he who, during the search a few minutes later, had the hardihood to call out:

"Otto, by all means allow these men to do their duty."

But he did not breathe freely until the agents of police had departed.

"At last," he exclaimed, "honor is saved! We have outwitted Lecoq!"

He had just left the bath, and enveloped himself in a *robe de chambre*, when Otto handed him a letter from the duchess.

He hastily broke the seal and read:

"You are safe. You know all. I am dying. Farewell. I loved you."

With two bounds he reached his wife's apartments. The door was locked: he burst it open. Too late!

Madame Blanche was dead—poisoned, like Marie-Anne; but she had procured a drug whose effect was instantaneous; and extended upon her couch, clad in her wonted apparel, her hands folded upon her breast, she seemed only asleep.

A tear glittered in Martial's eye.

"Poor, unhappy woman!" he murmured; "may God forgive you as I forgive you—you whose crime has been so frightfully expiated here below!"

END OF PART SECOND.

EPILOGUE.

THE FIRST SUCCESS.

Safe, in his own princely mansion, and surrounded by an army of retainers, the Duke de Sairmeuse triumphantly exclaimed:

"We have outwitted Lecoq!"

In this he was right.

But he thought himself forever beyond the reach of the wily, keen-witted detective; and in this he was wrong.

Lecoq was not the man to sit down with folded hands and brood over the humiliation of his defeat.

Before he went to Father Tabaret, he was beginning to recover from his stupor and despondency; and when he left that experienced detective's presence, he had regained his courage, his command over his faculties, and sufficient energy to move the world, if necessary.

"Well, my good man," he remarked to Father Absinthe, who was trotting along by his side, "you have heard what the great Monsieur Tabaret said, did you not? So you see I was right."

But his companion evinced no enthusiasm.

"Yes, you were right," he responded, in woe-begone tones.

"Do you think we are ruined by two or three mistakes? Nonsense! I will soon turn our defeat of to-day into a glorious victory."

"Ah! you might do so perhaps, if—they do not dismiss us from the force."

This doleful remark recalled Lecoq to a realizing sense of the present situation."

They had allowed a prisoner to slip through their fingers. That was vexatious, it is true; but they had captured one of the most notorious of criminals—Joseph Conturier. Surely there was some comfort in that.

But while Lecoq could have borne dismissal; he could not endure the thought that he would not be allowed to follow up this affair of the Poivriere.

What would his superior officers say when he told them that May and the Duke de Sairmeuse were one and the same person.

They would, undoubtedly, shrug their shoulders and turn up their noses.

"Still, M. Segmuller will believe me," he thought. "But will he dare to take any action in the matter without incontrovertible evidence?"

This was very unlikely. Lecoq realized it all too well.

"Could we not make a descent upon the Hotel de Sairmeuse, and, on some pretext or other, compel the duke to show himself, and identify him as the prisoner, May?

He entertained this idea only for an instant, then abruptly dismissed it.

"A stupid expedient!" he exclaimed. "Are two such men as the duke and his accomplice likely to be caught napping? They are prepared for such a visit, and we should only have our labor for our pains."

He made these reflections *sotto voce;* and Father Absinthe's curiosity was aroused.

"Excuse me," said he, "I did not quite understand you."

"I say that we must find some tangible proof before asking permission to proceed further."

He paused with knitted brows.

In seeking a circumstance which would establish the complicity between some member of the duke's household and the witnesses who had been called upon to give their testimony, Lecoq thought of Madame Milner, the owner of the Hotel de Mariembourg, and his first meeting with her.

He saw her again, standing upon a chair, her face on a level with a cage, covered with a large piece of black silk, persistently repeating three or four German words to a starling, who as persistently retorted: "Camille! Where is Camille?"

"One thing is certain," resumed Lecoq; "if Madame Milner—who is a German and who speaks with the strongest possible German accent—had raised this bird. it would either have spoken German or with the same accent as its mistress. Therefore it cannot have been in her possession long, and who gave it to her?"

Father Absinthe began to grow impatient.

"In sober earnest, what are you talking about?" he asked, petulantly.

"I say that if there is some one at the Hotel de Sairmeuse named Camille, I have the proof I desire. Come, Papa Absinthe, let us hurry on."

And without another word of explanation, he dragged his companion rapidly along.

When they reached the Rue de Grenell Lecoq saw a messenger leaning against the door of a wine-shop. Lecoq called him.

"Come, my boy," said he; "I wish you to go to the hotel de Sairmeuse and ask for Camille. Tell her that her uncle is waiting her here."

"But, sir——"

"What, you have not gone yet?"

The messenger departed; the two policemen entered the wine-shop, and Father Absinthe had scarcely had time to swallow a glass of brandy when the lad returned.

"Monsieur, I was unable to see Mlle. Camille. The house is closed from top to bottom. The duchess, died very suddenly this morning."

"Ah! the wretch!" exclaimed the young policeman.

Then, controlling himself, he mentally added:

"He must have killed his wife on returning home, but his fate is sealed. Now, I shall be allowed to continue my investigations."

In less than twenty minutes they arrived at the Palais de Justice.

M. Segmuller did not seem to be immoderately surprised at Lecoq's revelations. Still he listened with evident doubt to the young policeman's ingenious deductions; it was the circumstance of the starling that seemed to decide him.

"Perhaps you are right," my dear Lecoq," he said, at last; "and to tell the truth, I quite agree with you. But I can take no further action in the matter until you can furnish proof so convincing in its nature that the Duke de Sairmeuse will be unable to think of denying it."

"Ah! sir, my superior officers will not allow me——"

"On the contrary," interrupted the judge, "they will allow you the fullest liberty after I have spoken to them."

Such action on the part of M. Segmuller required not a little courage. There had been so much laughter about M. Segmuller's *grand seigneur*, disguised as a clown, that many men would have sacrificed their convictions to the fear of ridicule.

"And when will you speak to them?" inquired Lecoq, timidly.

"At once."

The judge had already turned towards the door when the young policeman stopped him.

"I have one more favor to ask, monsieur," he said, entreatingly. "You are so good; you are the first person who gave me any encouragement—who had faith in me."

"Speak, my brave fellow."

"Ah! monsieur, will you not give me a message for M. d'Escorval? Any insignificant message—inform him of the prisoner's escape. I will be the bearer of the message, and then—— Oh! fear nothing, monsieur; I will be prudent."

"Very well!" replied the judge.

When he left the office of his *chef*, Lecoq was fully authorized to proceed with his investigations, and in his pocket was a note for M. d'Escorval from M. Segmuller. His joy was so intense that he did not deign to notice the sneers which were bestowed upon him as he passed through the corridors. On the threshold his enemy Gevrol, the so-called general, was watching for him.

"Ah, ha!" he laughed, as Lecoq passed out, "here is one of those simpletons who

fish for whales and do not catch even a gudgeon."

For an instant Lecoq was angry. He turned abruptly and looked Gevrol full in the face.

"That is better than assisting prisoners to carry on a surreptitious correspondence with people outside," he retorted, in the tone of a man who knows what he is saying.

In his surprise, Gevrol almost lost countenance, and his blush was equivalent to a confession.

But Lecoq said no more. What did it matter to him now if Gevrol had betrayed him! Was he not about to win a glorious revenge!

He spent the remainder of the day in preparing his plan of action, and in thinking what he should say when he took M. Segmuller's note to Maurice d'Escorval.

The next morning about eleven o'clock he presented himself at the house of M. d'Escorval.

"Monsieur is in his study with a young man," replied the servant; "but, as he gave me no orders to the contrary, you may go in."

Lecoq entered.

She study was unoccupied. But from the adjoining room, separated from the study only by a velvet *portiere*, came a sound of stifled exclamations, and of sobs mingled with kisses.

Not knowing whether to remain or retire, the young policeman stood for a moment undecided; than he observed an open letter lying upon the carpet.

Impelled to do it by an impulse stronger than his own will, Lecoq picked up the letter. It read as follows.

"The bearer of this letter is Marie-Anne's son, Maurice—your son. I have given him all the proofs necessary to establish his identity. It was to his education that I consecrated the heritage of my poor Marie-Anne. Those to whose care I confided him have made a noble man of him. If I restore him to you, it is only because the life I lead is not a fitting life for him. Yesterday, the miserable woman who murdered my sister died from poison administered by her own hand. Poor Marie-Anne! she would have been far more terribly avenged had not an accident which happened to me, saved the Duke and the Duchess de Sairmeuse from the snare into which I had drawn them.

"JEAN LACHENEUR."

Lecoq stood as if petrified.

Now he understood the terrible drama which had been enacted in the Widow Chupin's cabin.

"I must go to Sairmeuse at once," he said to himself; "there I can discover all."

He departed without seeing M. d'Escorval. He resisted the temptation to take the letter with him.

It was exactly one month to a day after the death of Madame Blanche.

Reclining upon a divan in his library the Duke de Sairmeuse was engaged in reading, when Otto, his valet de chambre, came to inform him that a messenger was below, charged with delivering into the duke's own hands a letter from M. Maurice d'Escorval.

With a bound, Martial was on his feet.

"Is it possible," he exclaimed.

Then he added, quickly:

"Let the messenger enter."

A large man, with a very florid complexion, and red hair and beard, timidly handed the duke a letter.

Martial broke the seal, and read:

"I saved you, monsieur, by not recognizing the prisoner, May. In your turn, aid me! By noon, day after to-morrow, I must have two hundred and sixty thousand francs.

"I have sufficient confidence in your honor to apply to you.

"MAURICE D'ESCORVAL."

For a moment Martial stood bewildered, then, springing to a table, he began writing, without noticing that the messenger was looking over his shoulder:

"MONSIEUR—Not day after to-morrow, but this evening. My fortune and my life are at your disposal. It is but a slight return for the generosity you showed in retiring, when, beneath the rags of May, you recognized your former enemy, now your devoted friend,

"MARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE."

He folded this letter with a feverish hand, and giving it to the messenger with a louis, he said:

"Here is the answer, make haste!"

But the messenger did not go.

He slipped the letter into his pocket, then with a hasty movement he cast his red beard and wig upon the floor.

"Lecoq!" exclaimed Martial, paler than death.

"Lecoq, yes, monsieur," replied the young detective. "I was obliged to take my revenge; my future depended upon it, and I ventured to imitate M. d'Escorval's writing."

And as Martial made no response:

"I must also say to Monsieur le Duc," he continued, "that on transmitting to the judge, the confession written by the duke's own hand, of his presence at the Poivriere, I can and shall, at the same time, furnish proofs of his entire innocence."

And to show that he was ignorant of nothing, he added:

"As madame is dead, there will be nothing said in regard to what took place at the Borderie."

A week later a verdict of not guilty was rendered by M. Segmuller in the case of the Duke de Sairmeuse.

Appointed to the position he coveted, Lecoq had the good taste, or perhaps the shrewdness, to wear his honors modestly.

But on the day of his promotion, he ordered a seal, upon which was engraved the exultant rooster, which he had chosen as his armorial design, and a motto to which he ever remained faithful: *Semper Vigilans.*

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